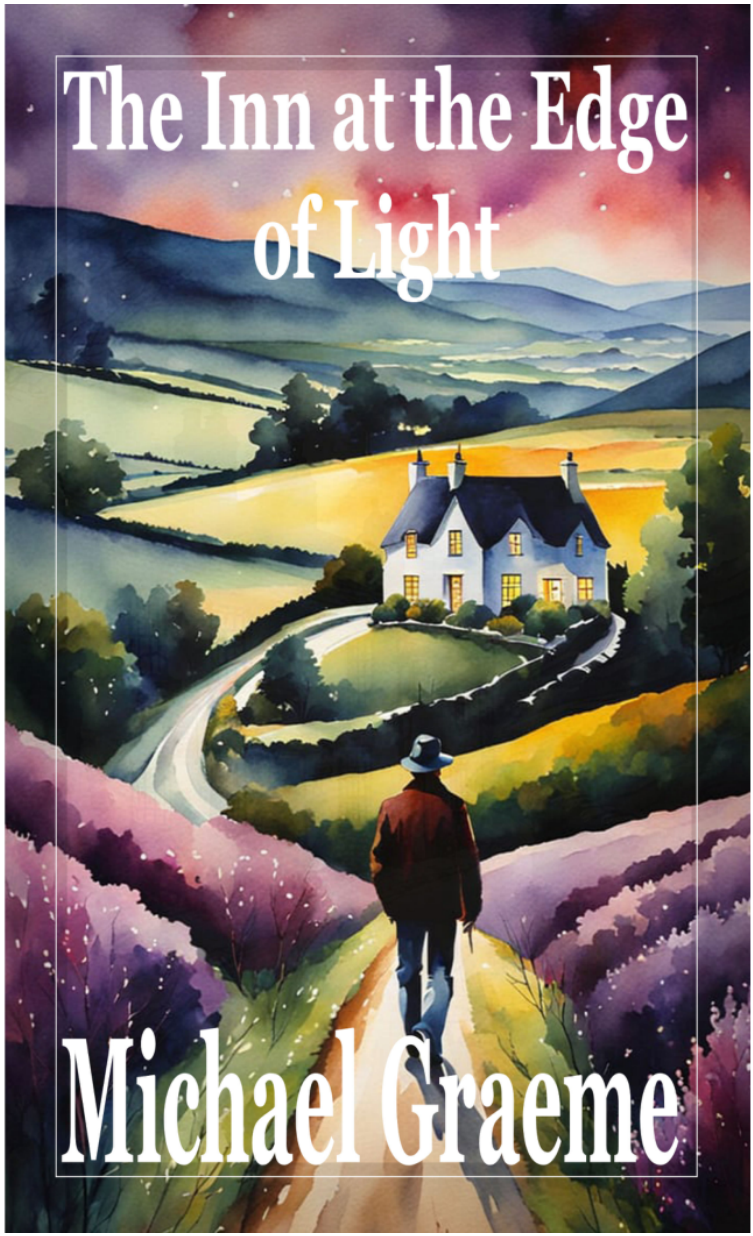
The Inn at the Edge of Light
Michael Graeme

The Inn at the Edge of Light

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The Inn at the Edge of Light
by
Michael Graeme

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

The Inn at the Edge of Light

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty One

Chapter Twenty Two

Chapter Twenty Three

Chapter Twenty Four

Chapter Twenty Five

Chapter Twenty Six

Chapter Twenty Seven

Chapter Twenty Eight

Chapter Twenty Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty One

Chapter Thirty Two

Chapter Thirty Three

Chapter Thirty Four

Chapter Thirty Five

Chapter Thirty Six

Chapter Thirty Seven

Chapter Thirty Eight

Chapter Thirty Nine

Chapter Forty

Chapter Forty One

Chapter Forty Two

To the intellect, mythologising is futile speculation. To the emotions, however, it is a healing and valid activity; it gives existence a certain glamour which we would not like to do without. Nor is there any reason why we should.

Carl Jung (Memories, Dreams, Reflections)

Chapter One

It's Yorkshire, somewhere in the Dales. The last moments of twilight are leaking into shadow when you arrive on the lane. There's the silhouette of a forest all around, and beyond it an immense body of moor that, for all you know, goes on for ever. There's the sound of a river and the movement of trees beginning to limber up in a freshening wind, then the skitter of dry leaves on the road, a sense of early autumn and the year's last gasp. There are cottages, all in darkness now – neat, unobtrusive little dwellings with tidy paintwork, yet no hint they've ever been lived in, and there's the profile of a church-tower over the wall that goes back to the last time England was invaded.

The only guiding light in all of this is that of the inn, up ahead. It's a warm light, welcoming, and there's this feeling you want to be indoors, and quickly, so as not to be exposed to the coming mysteries of the night in this ill-defined place. So you turn your collar against the wind and make the last few yards, brisk as you can, afraid of the light going out before you reach it, for then where would you be?

The door gives way to the tinkle of little bells and you're hit with that warm fug of inns from long ago: pipe tobacco, the scent of beer and food. There's a lively hubbub, the click of dominoes upon polished wood, the whack of darts, the hearty cheer of winners seeming to brighten the interior light, the good natured groans of losers seeming to brighten it all the more. It's a jolly place, and clearly all are welcome.

The landlord looks up like he knows you. He's a ruddy faced man in a crisp white shirt. There's no smile in him but he manages a curt, respectful nod like you're a regular here, regular enough to have him reaching for the tumbler and the whisky bottle: Old Fettlecairn. He knows what you like, wastes no time serving up a generous measure of it, and it's on the bar waiting before you get there. He's a polished host, welcoming, serious, a hovering attentiveness too as if ever ready for you to tell him your deepest, darkest troubles, while for answers he'd no doubt point cryptically to the little shot glasses lined up, on the shelf, behind.

"Evening, John," he says. "Bit cold out there tonight."

He knows your name, which is more than you do, knows the

names of everyone in here, you suppose, knows their favourite tipple, can tell at a glance if, after the challenges of their day, they're up for company, or if they just want a quiet table alone while their consciousness sets sail for morning.

"Cold, yes. Wind's freshening."

You say this every time. It's like a code, like a set of passwords to a deeper understanding. If only you knew to what end.

"Room's all ready for you," he says. "Put this on your tab then shall I?" He winks at you. Another little conspiracy. If only you knew what he meant by that as well. "Settle up in the morning, eh?"

"On the tab? Sure. Right you are."

Except you know you won't be here in the morning. You've never managed it yet, so why should this occasion be any different? What's more, he knows it too. It's all a dream, you see? You'll probably wake a million miles away, though, like your name, you forget where now. It's the usual dream thing, only in reverse, all sense of your waking reality leaking away the moment you set foot in here, then all sense of this place leaking away when you wake up again, the two faces of yourself coexistent, but seemingly unaware of each other.

You share one last glance, not really sure if it's him holding everything together or if it’s you. So far the pattern repeats; you take your drink to a quiet table, take refuge in the shadows from where you watch the various games in play. None make sense. Of the dominoes you can see, they're not linked up by equal dots – there's some unfathomable rule at play. The dartboard has no numbers either and between each round the players spin it so it comes up random like a roulette wheel. But it's okay, no need to panic; dreams are like that, aren't they?

You take a sip. The taste of the whiskey is as fine as one would expect, or at least as *you* would expect, for no other reason than it's your expectation that's making it so, because you've an inkling that's the way things work here. Sometimes you even manage to finish the glass before waking. Sometimes you make it up to your room, to sleep, then wake up just the same, back wherever your other self, your waking-life self, laid his head. So then you become one, him and you, again, whatever *his* name is, and go about your business, or rather *his* business. You wish you could remember what that business is, exactly, but there's a side of you wondering if it's a blessing that you don't. I mean, what if you're a prisoner held in

some monstrous prison? And worse, what if you deserve to be there? But more than that, you're wondering what your business is, in here, because you've a feeling it's important you get to the bottom of it and you've only so long to do it in.

There's someone already at your table. You don't see him until its too late, until you're almost on top of him and he's caught your eye. The dream's telling you this is different, unexpected, but he looks friendly so you sit down.

"Evenin'," you say, and he nods in reply. He's an old guy in tweeds, plumpish, with a round, weather-tanned face, and he's drawing thoughtfully on his pipe.

He nods his greeting, then says: "Safer that way, see?"

"Safer?"

"What you were thinking just then. I mean, it can cause all sorts of problems, wandering into a place like this, thinking you already know who you are and what you're about. Better just to go with the flow of things. See where they lead you."

He takes a weighty pocket watch from his waistcoat, rests it on the table. You think to glimpse the time by it, as much as there can be any sense of time in a place like this, but there are no fingers on it. He sees you're puzzled by that, as one might be, and he smiles. "Curious, isn't it?"

You're not sure how to reply. You take another sip of your whiskey, but it tastes sour now. You're willing yourself to settle in, to believe in the solidity, in the objective reality of this place, but for all of that you know you're about to wake up.

But where, and when?

Chapter Two

Well, how about the summer of '87? You're on the isle of Skaravaig, off the west coast of Scotland. The bothy you're just coming up to is stone-built, and solid-looking enough, all randomly coursed, with a chimney and a neatly pitched, though slightly sagging, slate roof. The door and windows are in good order, the woodwork showing a recent lick of green paint. It's a little inland, but still within sight and sound of the sea. At its back rises the darkening profile of a mountain, though the precise shape of it's as yet only to be guessed at, it being capped by a lazy smudge of grey clag that's not for budging, not today anyway.

You've read it's the thing they all come here to climb, a multitude of guide books singing its praises, but you're only interested in it as background. Maybe tomorrow you'll get a better view but for now you can forget it. As far as objective reality goes this is impressive, as real as it gets, also notably unmarked by anything resembling a time-stamp. Indeed what you're looking at now is probably unchanged in half a century. Accordingly you slip your watch into your pocket, go by the feel of the light on your skin.

It's a few hour's walk from the road where you've left the car, and a lonely stretch of road at that, five miles of single track from the cluster of little houses down by the harbour, this being the only settlement on the island. Then it's a mile of choppy blue in a Calmac ferry to the mainland, and a region of the UK with a population density as near to zero as makes no difference.

It was most likely a shepherd's hut in former times, a sheiling they called them, and a neat little place kept going now by the estate, a lone splash of succour in an otherwise overwhelming wilderness, a place that, even now, centuries after the clearances, tells still of an awful emptiness.

It's clean and dry inside, just the one small room, some hooks for wet coats, a shovel for the latrine, a rough shelf of fragile paperbacks for when the weather is too fierce to venture out. The floor's swept, a little stack of wood and newspapers by the fireplace, a half used sack of coal, and there's a pair of simple bunks, one either side of the fireplace. As bothies go this is small but relatively luxurious.

You light the fire and settle in for the big adventure. It's late afternoon, June, cold and blowing for rain – typical enough for the western highlands and islands at this time of year.

There are only about a hundred bothies in the whole of Britain, all of them in lonely places like this, and you've set yourself the task of photographing every one, but you can't say why. It's not like you're going to write a book, or pitch a feature to the National Geographic or anything. You've tried all that before, and you're waking up to the somewhat sobering conclusion that in an increasingly hedonistic decade, and at the grand old age of twenty six, you're already irrelevant in a world that seems happy enough without you in it.

Sure, if you've learned anything of use by now it's this: establishing a purpose in life is everything to a man, and whether that purpose seems big or small, it doesn't matter, and we all get to choose, but here's the thing: the best choices always run counter to the Zeitgeist, and it's that problem, that paradox and how we deal with it that writes the story of our lives.

You? You've just lost your job in the design office, five years in the training, and thinking you were set for the next forty, like the generation before you, and in the absence of anything else, you've loaded all your gear into the car and headed north because you'd been planning to anyway. Better than spending all your time in bed, half in and half out of sleep, which is what you were doing before.

You shoot in monochrome because you've got this hazy notion you see more in black and white. Again, you can't say why. You use an Olympus OM10 with a Zuiko prime lens, still do in fact, though it was old even back then. But the camera's just an excuse really, like a magnifying glass you use to get a closer look at a thing.

You don't know what you're looking for exactly, but you've a feeling you were closer to it in '87 than you are now, wherever and whenever *now* is. Because once again you've got this weird feeling you're looking back on yourself, and it isn't '87 any more, like you're dreaming yourself as you were, and you're afraid to sleep sometimes in case you wake up somewhere and somewhen else, that you're lost in time, or smeared out across all times, actually, and finding it harder every day to convince yourself you exist at all.

Anyway, you've gone outside now and you're squeezing off some shots of the bothy against a grey sea, just playing with compositions for the better weather you're hoping will be on the morrow. And

suddenly, as is so often the way here, the clouds tear open a hole and let loose from the eternal gold beyond, stray javelins of what you're hoping is a revelatory light.

The light picks out something in the grass a little distance away, shiny, glinting. It draws you to it. It's an empty whiskey bottle, an old one, a discarded remnant of some long ago firelight vigil. Goodness knows how long it's lain there, so tangled it is in the undergrowth of many a season.

Though the label's long gone there's a name moulded into the bottle: Old Fettlecairn. The cork's still in place, as if to preserve something in the emptiness. Curious, you pick it up, thinking to set it safely aside. The cork gives a satisfying pop as you pull it out. Then you hold it briefly under your nose to see if any ghost of scent remains. There’s nothing like the scent of a fine whiskey, is there?

It's stronger than you're expecting for something so obviously long spent. It's peaty, salty, sweet with caramel and old sherry from the casks. It's deep, complex... and you know you've smelled something like that before, but you can't say where or when, and that's just part of the mystery you suppose, and for a while you're content enough to lose yourself in it. Then you put your lips across the opening like it's a flute and you blow, releasing a pure note, surprising in its pitch – much higher and purer than you're expecting, and oddly resonant. Then something moves in the distance.

And that's when you see her...

Chapter Three

But that's for later, or maybe it's already past, or maybe it's just this thing you're imagining might happen one day – a daydream perhaps, and you can no longer bring it clearly to mind, because you're in Yorkshire again, on that bit of road. And the inn's up ahead, and the only thing you're certain of is you've dreamed this dream before, unless it's the dream telling you you've dreamed it before, and then there's no real way of knowing, is there? And who's dreaming all of this anyway, if it isn't you?

So, the wind's blowing and the light's going and you turn your collar like always, and you make for the only door you know for sure is open to you. And the landlord's there, and your whiskey's waiting and your room's ready, and he senses you're not in the mood for company tonight, so there's no old tweedy guy at your table with a watch from long ago, one that suggests there's never been such a thing as passing time at all, at least not in here. But if that's true what's the point of the intricate works of it ticking and tocking and the balance swinging to and fro, and the hairspring beating like a little heart – because that's how watches used to be – if it's all for nothing? And then you wonder if you're remembering this right, or if it's just the dream telling you it's true, filling in a back-story like it's your past or your future, or something,

Then you're sipping at your whiskey, wishing you could remember where you fell asleep, and is the scent of it only familiar because the dream is telling you so, or is there more to it? Is there something from your waking-life informing the dream, like things so often do? But then again does it really matter, because it's just a scent and it reminds you of nothing in particular beyond igniting in you this peculiar sense of longing for a thing you can't imagine, other than how desperately you want it?

It's the same old crew in here tonight – rustics, you might call them – like from a Thomas Hardy novel. They're a little raucous, happy in their beer and their incomprehensible games, but most noticeable is there are no lonesome, pint-pot stares, as in modern times. All are engaged, all busy, even if it looks like they're doing nothing and thus are no more meaningful to you than background noise. Nothing they say, that you can catch at least, makes sense; there is no message in their prattle that would explain your

constantly winding up here – I mean, if it's true you're constantly winding up here and it's not just the dream telling you that.

Then you spot a girl at the bar; vest-top and shorts and lots of bare, tanned skin, long hair down her back and an enormous pack on the floor at her feet, like she's just come down from a day in the hills. She's looking at you in a knowing sort of way and you're wondering if you should, actually know her, or if she's just one of those girls who pop up in dreams from time to time, symbolic of your own lonesomeness and all your weary longing.

Then you're wondering how old you are, because in dreams you always feel about twenty five, so how old are you really, Chris? No, wait, don't you mean John? Where are you getting Chris from – I mean, as you're dreaming this? and is what you're feeling when you look at this girl's legs really what you *should* be feeling, or are you harbouring a loneliness that's so old it's way past spent and actually... pathetic?

But that look means something, and suddenly there's a signal in her smile and the salute of her glass before she takes a sip, and you're not sure what to do about that. So you quit the bar in fright, take your drink up to your room because you know the room is safe and clean, that the sheets are fresh and the pillows soft, like the ones you slept on as a boy, and if you open your window a crack you can taste the air of the Dales, though you can't see anything for the darkness now and there's only your own reflection in the glass.

You look young enough in that reflection, not that it's any sort of guarantee. Then you slip off your shoes and sink back into cool goose-down. Did you not bring a bag? Have you no clean things for tomorrow? But you won't be here, remember? You're never here in the morning, always waking up in some other place, but right now never knowing where, or when, or what your purpose here is.

All right, so you're feeling lonely tonight. Are you hoping there'll come a tapping on your door and the dream will deliver up the girl from downstairs? deliver an experience of the scalding erotic as only dreams can do? Except you know you'll regret that, that you'll wake somewhere with an ache ten times worse than what you're suffering now, and one that can't be soothed by anything the waking day has to offer. What does that say about your life? What does that say about life in general?

The tap doesn't come, and maybe it's because you consciously reject it, or at least as consciously as anyone can when they're

already asleep. That's it you see? That's the paradox of this place, laying back on your pillow and fretting for all the things you don't know about, and trying to sleep for the noise in your head. But if you're already asleep what you're actually trying to do here... is wake up.

Remember?

So wake up, Chris.

Chapter Four

You draw back your curtains to let in some light. It's just the city beyond the glass, now and you don't want to know anything about that. When you were a kid the city was still a bus ride away, but now it's all around you with its buckled concrete and bits of sky, all thick with delivery drones. The streets that once knew the cheery tinkle of the milkman's dawn electric float are now littered with the detritus and maybe even the corpses of last night's drug addled revelry.

You remember a time when your dad clipped his privet hedge and mowed his lawn ever so neatly, and all the neighbours did the same. Now you'd risk getting stabbed, just to brighten the dullness of someone else's day, and there are barely the cops left even to shrug their indifference at the insanity of it all. Indeed the only cops now are the private ones protecting the rich, while the remaining few are huddled over surveillance monitors recording crimes they're powerless to prosecute, or prevent.

Everything you know, everything you remember is so long ago and weighs so heavily in memory you've barely the room to know what happened yesterday. But that's not a problem because it's most likely not much different to what will happen today.

So you make coffee, put on your work-clothes and enter the suite, what used to be your childhood bedroom in the long ago. You're clocking up the years now and you're back in your parents' house, in a sense never having left home, just adapted to circumstances as you found them. And how else do you afford a property in this day and age?

Your dad paid for this hodge-podge of bricks and mortar and paint-peeled wood over a quarter century with regular and solid paychecks from the pit. You? You have a PhD and a Professorship now, but if you'd not inherited, you couldn't even come close to laying down half the foundations he did with no formal qualifications whatsoever.

There's a guy already sitting there, looking sad, like he always does. He's not *actually* there of course, just the other side of the glass, the other side of the world, but you're not entirely sure where, because he's vague about it, instinctively evasive like most of his type, which doesn't exactly help with the therapy. He's

American, obviously, at least judging by the accent, which should narrow it down, but the rich are so rootless he really could be anywhere, and anywhere else, next time. Sure, he's got more money than some small countries, at least that's what his wiki-page admits to, but in the rich stakes he's strictly mediocre, and maybe that's his problem. You've noted the rich are also terrible payers and need nailing down from the start with a scheduled bank-transfer.

So what are you doing here, Chris?

Good question.

Well... this guy expects you to make him feel better, doesn't he? And why not? He's paying a lot of money for your time, so you'd think you might have some answers for him, because that's your job after all, and you do, but they aren't the answers he wants to hear, because the obvious becomes invisible the more you move into his world, and therein lies the nature of his malaise.

He's an eight on the Enneagram, usual pathological tendencies, your typical alpha, useful in the right circumstances, marshalling resources, getting stuff done, working insane hours. But the more power and wealth they gain the more vulnerable they are to the various sociopathic tendencies that haunt their type. You've told him this, set him objectives, hoping he'd then go and do something about it, but he keeps coming back, seeking comfort in expensive lies and obfuscation.

So you give him an hour of your time, and he fades out as sad as ever, only having drained a bit out of you as well that you'll be a while topping up again. The hardest part of the job, apart from making sure the bastards pay up, is being open enough in yourself to care, while not forgetting to protect yourself by pretending to yourself that you don't.

Next up is Bunny, dialling in on the off chance, she says, and that's a shock because you've not seen her in a while. You met her at a conference, years ago, and you hit it off, in ways that might be construed as unprofessional. She was always a strange one, Bunny, and looking better than she ought to now for a woman of her years, though that may be the romantic in you tinting your vision.

You don't know where she is either because she never tells you, says she's just checking in, and making sure you're feeding yourself all right. Then she peels off her pants and the pair of you sit there comforting yourself a while. Like most breakthroughs in visual technology, sex finds a way to take advantage of it, and holograms

are no different.

You're having an affair of sorts, then, though you've never actually done anything intimate, other than under cover of this glass wall, and that client confidentiality thing. No, she's not your client really, and you aren't hers, but it's a mutual therapy of sorts and you've convinced yourselves it doesn't count when you do it this way.

Afterwards you both snooze a little in your respective armchairs, and then she's hitching up her skirt and asking if you're still taking pictures with that same old camera. So you tell her yes, though it's getting well nigh impossible now to have monochrome processed, and you're going to have to rig up some sort of antique darkroom of your own. And you'd do it too except after all this time you're no longer sure if you're seeing with or through the eye, and if it's worth it, and anyway your wife would pull a face at the absurdity, always assuming she could lift her eyes long enough from her phone to make any kind of face at you at all.

Bunny clicks off and you're staring at a blank wall for a bit, remembering suddenly that time at the old bothy, wondering if it's still there, though you heard some loony tycoon had bought the whole island and fenced it off, has it patrolled by a private army for fear of all the people he's shat on, and he imagines now are trying to kill him. So then you do your thing with the box and you dial up those old images, and Jen's standing there, her image projected in all its three-dimensional hyper non-reality, and you're longing for the far away feel of those days once more, and for the genuine warm touch of another human being.

When the hell was the last time John? I mean Chris. Where are you getting John from? When was the last time someone touched you, or you sought that touch and you both really meant it? It's tough, thinking about that one, I know, because the paradox of your type, Chris is you crave the absolute and somewhat abstract release of an intense sexual intimacy, the more wordless the better. But when it comes to taking that thing and weaving it into a relationship, you don't know where to start, do you?

So you check your bank-account instead, and the interest earned, and you make sure the machine has paid your taxes, not like last time when it screwed things up completely and you were months to sorting it out. You nearly got sanctioned that time, six months, and not your fault. They used to send people to prison on

such whims as that, now they just cut your cloud access and people realise they're already in a prison of their own making.

But let's not dwell on any of that. Warm yourself instead with the fact that even with everything taken out – your taxes and cloud fees and such – you're still way ahead of the game, that you could escape the job, the city everything, except something's happened to you in the mean time. Maybe it's dealing with these broken people all day long, and for decades, but you're feeling there's no longer anything worthwhile escaping to, no refuge from the world still worth its name.

You remind yourself it was Jen's idea, this path you took, this bold, beautiful, tough-looking girl. You might have been programming computers instead of re-programming broken minds. But you've a feeling she was right about that anyway. It's just that you're finding it puzzling when that broken mind would rather cling to its fractures, and maybe the lesson you should take from it is the priority of understanding the cracks in your own self, and knowing, day to day, how to stop them running your self to smithereens.

Then the corner of the room lights up, obliterating Jen's image. It's your ten o'clock. A politician, hard as nails on the outside, another pathological eight, like all our leaders seem to be these days, but at thirty five still wets the bed, so beneath the mask she's just plain scared like the rest of us. She isn't interested in the answers either, only in repeatedly stating the problem, as if by doing so she'll wear you into submission. As you talk things through with her, you're wishing you could deal with some ordinary people for a change, because power and money just makes people mean and crazy. Ordinariness just makes you angry, and that's easier, even for a counsellor as mediocre as you are, to see through to the wisdom underneath, and you sure could use some wisdom, Chris.

But they can't afford the fees.

It's every man, woman and child for themselves now. Or so you're told. And you don't know anything any more, not for sure. All you know is you feel empty, something hanging over from last night's dream, which you just can't get a handle on, something about an old inn, that maybe you've dreamed before, and though other dreams you've had can be vivid and linger in memory for days, there's something slippery about this one, and it's always gone by the time you've reached for your pad to jab it down.

Maybe if you asked yourself, next time you dream of it, you

want to hold on to the details a bit – at least until you can get them down, because a dream that can colour your day like this has to be talking to you in some way or other. And maybe next time you wake it'll be to an understanding of what your life is all about. Because this can't be right, can it? And worse it's looking like it's mostly over now and that would mean it had all been a terrible waste of time, that any kind of redemption at so late an hour as this would be futile, that – to put it short – you had failed, Chris.

Chapter Five

"Failed?"

It's the old tweedy guy again, at least you think it is. Although you know you've been this way before, you also know you can't rely on the memory of it, that some time ago his watch had no fingers, or maybe you've yet to dream that bit, or maybe the dream's just telling you you've dreamed it. Anyway, tonight the fingers say it's ten past ten.

"Life," you tell him, your words coming at you from some inner mood carried over from the day, though which day you can no longer remember. "My life out there, up top, I mean – in reality. That I've failed at it, or am failing... or some such thing... or at any rate I'm not getting a good feeling about it."

He shrugs. "How are we to know what's out there? Safer not to."

Yes, he's said something of this sort before.

He seems the type who talks in circles, inverts everything you say and points it right back at you – not as a solution to anything, but maybe more to indicate your question is as absurd as the answer you're looking for, or just to get you thinking about your life and what you say and what you think.

"Consider only this," he says, "At five past eleven the gap narrows, and then you're just fifty five minutes away from when the fingers scissor down to snip their way through the singularity of midnight. Would you like another drink?"

You tell him no, you don't want another drink, that you need to keep your head clear, but you offer to get him one, and before even you can catch the landlord's eye, he's brought it over. It's a pint of beer, dark amber, seemingly glowing with the light of revelation, like something you saw on the ocean once, beams of light from holes torn in clouds, and the waters below all alight.

"Will it be on the tab, sir?"

"Sure, on the tab."

He's calling you sir tonight? You're wondering why that is of a sudden. But you're also wondering what the damage is, and if you'd ever be wise to see in the light of day for real in case you couldn't afford the tariff, and how expensive are our dreams anyway?

So then you look at your own watch and do the actions, and sure enough he's right how the fingers close with a scissor-snip

precisely at midnight and you wonder how you could have doubted so obvious a thing. There are other magical symmetries in the round of it, too, times when the fingers are still open, but centred around midnight: They occur at fourteen minutes past nine or thereabouts, then around eight-and-a-bit minutes past ten, and maybe around four minutes past eleven, but these are imprecise figures and somehow unsatisfying in their vagueness.

You could probably calculate them, but you feel a rising panic as you consider the mathematical tools you would need to get at them. You might have done it once, when you were an engineer, a student of mathematics and geometry in particular. Or are you just dreaming that? Are you dreaming how you once calculated by partial derivation the shearing stresses on a screw thread, then verified it by tensile experiments in the lab?

How did you do that, when now you can barely remember your times tables, and of those, only the squares: two twos are four; three threes are nine and so on, up to twelve. You sense the loss of so much and wonder what the point was in the learning of it, how only at midnight, when the fingers close precisely can you do the sums any more because nature arranges for the answers to be easy, that you can speak with confidence, shrug and tell yourself that anyway none of it matters. And who cares? It's just a dumb trick with a watch.

"But that's nihilism," you tell him, because you know he's following your thoughts, and though you don't remember your self any more, you do know you don't believe in that, that there's this cloud of instinctive beliefs that supports you, both here and in the other place, up top, so to speak, and one of the things you refuse to believe is the pointlessness of your own existence.

"However," he says. "The world of matter, taken in isolation, demands it."

"Demands what?"

"Pointlessness," he says. "There can be no other conclusion."

But he doesn't mean this. He's challenging you to counter him. You take a sip from the dregs of your whiskey, just a tiny one, look for answers in the lingering scent of it, something to refute him with.

"Just as well we're dreaming then."

His eyes light up in approval. "Exactly! Now tell me, what do you know of dreams?"

"Only that they aren't a material thing. They're not comprised of matter."

He's nodding now, smiling. "Yet here we both are, thinking, talking, drinking, in a dream. Curious isn't it?"

But in the dreaming nothing is what it appears at face value. Here all things are symbols, even the words we speak, and you realise the closing of the hands at midnight could be symbolic of the end life, that up to then we are lost in the complexity of life, calculating the symmetries as we see them, but only at midnight do we regain the truth.

"It isn't it too late then?" you ask.

"Depends which side of the singularity you consider home."

"Is this my home?"

No, you're thinking, or maybe he's thinking it for you. The Inn at the Edge of Light is just an inn, not a destination in itself. It's somewhere you stop for the night on the way to somewhere else. It's like that night on the island, remember? Think, man! You *do* remember it, don't you? Maybe it's past or future, but that doesn't matter here. There was, or is, a bothy, an old shieling near the sea. You'll spend, or have already spent, the night there in anticipation of another morning and clearer weather.

And there was this girl,... just coming out of the mist.

Chapter Six

There. You see her, now? She's high, on a shoulder of the mountain, making her way down. And as she draws closer you see she's wearing only shorts and a bra, which is about as much of a male fantasy cliché as you can imagine, so your first thought is you might be hallucinating, or dreaming. It wouldn't be the first time your eyes have played tricks on you in the wild, though you have to admit this is a pleasing variation.

You feel a shiver, someone stepping over your grave, as they say. She's familiar, but not in the way of having actually met her before, at least not in the regular run of things, though you don't know what you mean by that. Maybe you dreamed of her, and you've forgotten. You've read how sometimes dreams can do that, give you glimpses of things that are yet to be, as well as the way things once were.

She has long blonde hair that whips about in the wind, and you're thinking she must be cold up there, half dressed as she is, except she doesn't look it. Indeed, she looks like she's out in the desert, descending a sun-kissed dune while filming a daft fragrance advert, not half way up a Scottish hill on a cold, claggy day. She moves slowly, with a fluid grace, even with that big pack on her back. There's something eerie about her, like she knows the land, like she owns it or is part of it, or something – but you're romanticising now, and maybe not remembering things correctly, not sure if you're remembering anything correctly any more.

You remember feeling disappointed – of that you're certain. It's common enough to meet others in lonely places like this, even to spend the night with them in cheerful fire-lit conversation; mountain-men, walkers – they were mostly men in those days – and such people seemed to have an affinity for your own eccentric obsession, perhaps on account of their own. But you've always preferred it if you could get a place to yourself. There's something altogether deeper about the experience of over-nighting in the wild, in a bothy like this one, on your own.

Conversation and company are all well and good, but they pull you out of your head, and away from the intimate feel of a place. All right, you know places don't actually have feelings, that the feeling comes from inside of you; you imagine it, but there's still

something in the land that brings it out. And sometimes, just sometimes, in a photograph, you can capture that, and remind yourself of it. Or sometimes, more rarely, the camera will see something else, something you've missed and it comes out in the printing of it. But nothing happens without the eye and the mind that sees through it.

Anyway, she's a beauty, this woman, no denying that, and that's a pity because you've always found women difficult – never been with one, actually, and at twenty-six, it's late to be starting. And beautiful women are the worst, always like a dagger to your throat. You freeze whenever you're near one, struck dumb by something you don't understand, and they always seem aware of it, that you're afraid, that you're looking for something in them they don't have, which means you don't have what they want either, which makes you useless to them.

So, while other guys are jetting off to the Costa Del Sol every summer with box-loads of jolly condoms in their luggage, you're taking these long drives on your own to places others rarely go, into the rain and the mist, and the extraordinary beauty of the Western Highlands and the Islands. You're all after the same thing in a way, except there's no way you can fuck what you're after, even if you could define the shape of it, and it's not for want of trying.

So you watch her for a while – not directly – just keep her in the corner of your eye. Maybe she'll pass on by. Perhaps even your presence will do it. Sure, you've only to clap eyes on a girl and she'll melt away like she thinks you're Jack the Ripper. But she clocks you from some way out and waves an unselfconscious greeting, like she really knows you, like she's been scouring the whole damned universe for you, and now here you are at last. She comes right down to the bothy, nods her acquaintance in a serious, manly sort of way and slides her pack to the ground. She offers her hand to shake.

"Hi, I'm Jen," she says. "How you doin'?"

You shake, something firm in her grip, not exactly manly, more confidently feminine, and that scares you. Why? Because you're a man, and you don't know what it means to be a man, only what it's not, and what it's not is what every other man seems to be aiming at, at least to your eyes, eh, Chris?

"I'm doing well, thanks. I'm Chris. Yourself?"

"I'm good." She motions with her head to the bothy, whose

chimney now trails a thin, plume of smoke. "You're here for the night?"

"That's the plan."

"Makes two of us then. Haven't seen another soul for days. Good to meet you. You don't snore do you?"

"I don't think I snore, no."

"Well I do. You're in for a rough night, mate."

Okay, so she's the playful type and that's interesting. Beautiful women are one thing, but playful ones are an unknown phenomenon, at least to you. She pulls on a vest-top, too tight for modesty, then steps in front of the camera, gives you a hands-on-hips, legs wide pose. Does she expect you to take her picture?

"What? You don't like people in your frame, Chris?"

No, you suppose not. Other guys with cameras are tempting girls in front of the lens, and out of their clothes. God knows how they manage that. You can't even get one to join you for a coffee. Landscapes and old buildings, that's you. No people. People are a waste of film. Timeless things, things that look the same decades apart, that's you. Put a girl in the frame, even without a stitch on her and you can still date that picture to within a year or so from the style of her hair.

"Go on, take the shot," she says, something teasing in her tone. "Something to remember me by. And you never know, it might mean something to you one day."

"Oh? Such as?"

"Like maybe the future we never had. So take the shot, or you'll never know."

Curious thing to say – or at least that's what you think she said, or maybe the wind was in your ears and you've not got it quite right. You'd ask her to repeat it but you don't want to appear stupid. So you take the shot, thinking it's the friendly thing to do.

You reckon she's a little older than you, late twenties. Maybe that's why she's so much at ease in your company, so much more in control. Or maybe it's the knife in her belt, behind her back, that gives her confidence around strangers. You spot that one late as she turns to go inside – a big knife, not a hunting knife either, more of a weapon. It's curved, like something from the Middle-East, all bound and secured in a leather scabbard. Maybe she's just the kind of girl who can handle herself, and is fine if unprovoked, or maybe she's a psycho. You've heard most psychos are men, but one can't be too

careful.

So, anyway, it gives you pause, that knife, and you wonder about gathering your stuff and retreating back down to the car, because she seems a little weird to you of a sudden, possibly dangerous, except just then the rain comes on heavy and you want the gear inside where it's dry, because that camera means a lot to you. Or maybe that's just what you tell yourself and you know it's a lie, that what you really want is to spend the night – even if it's only in chaste expectation – with a girl like that, a girl who carries a knife, is confident in her femininity, and handles herself well.

Chapter Seven

You're looking at that knife now, actually. It's on your dressing table as you write, though you don't know if your dream of it's inspired by recent events or if it's the memory of something from long ago. Nor does the dream elaborate on how you came by it, but you'd gladly trade the knowledge of that for an inkling regarding which part of your life you're dreaming this from, and how come these events have turned out to be so important to you – I mean to be included here in the seeming nexus hours of the Inn at the Edge of Light.

The window's open and you hear the church clock strike. You count seven, but it's dark. The air is warm and it still has the feel of late summer about it, so it can't be seven can it? Not seven, *and* dark. Sunset in the northern climes in summer is much later than that. Yes, you know these aren't really the northern climes, that they have to be symbolic of something, like all things are symbolic in the dreaming, and maybe in the waking hours too, but you trust the symbolic meaning of darkness at this hour is meaningful at a deeper level than that you're simply benighted in life, and always have been, or worse, that by now you might even be dead.

Then you look at what you're writing but you can't make it out. Like the darkness, it's purely symbols – all pictograms and doodles – but you're certain they mean something and you can't fathom them, and if only you could then you'd be able to understand yourself, because you've an inkling this is a purer language, welling up from a level deeper than mere words, that the words we invent are in part an attempt to articulate the deeper mystery of our being.

There's a door that connects to the adjacent room. It's the first time you've noticed it. You've heard sounds from the other side; the slide of a drawer, the swish of a skirt. It reminds you there was a woman in the bar, dressed in Victorian costume, and you could tell by her hair she was from 1881, and you know that sounds like nonsense – I mean that you can be so precise about it, going off nothing more than the style of a woman's hair – but it's the dream telling you all of this, which makes it just so. Nor can you be reminiscing, within the dream, I mean, because from all points of the dreaming, the time is "now", so she was obviously just so as well, something or someone welling up from the ground of your

own being, and of immediate significance.

She was sitting at a corner table, half in and half out of shadow, had on a blue velvet dress, sapphires and silver for jewels. She wasn't drinking, just sitting, watching people, like you were. Once or twice she glanced your way and you wondered if you were just another face to her, a part of the baffling noise of this place, or if you meant something. She neither spoke nor smiled, did not acknowledge you in any way.

No one seemed perturbed by her anachronistic presence, her clothes that is, so obviously out of date, but then they're mostly anachronistic themselves, the crowd in here, all jackets and cords and baggy jumpers, something equally from another time surely? for you remember baseball caps and teeshirts and gym pants were once the vogue, or is that yet to be? And then you were thinking if she's really from so long ago, does that means she's dead and her presence in your dream makes her a ghost, or it makes both of you ghosts in some other time, long after both your own times, and would that work? Philosophically, I mean. Except the guy with the pocket watch warned you about thinking like that, warned you too about thinking you know who you are when you enter a place like this, so maybe we shouldn't be judging who other people are, or were or might be either.

There's a symmetry about that date – 1881. You write it down in your book. Your memory of historical events is as vague as anything else from your waking life but you feel sure it's not so much a date we're talking about here as a symbol, and numbers are potent symbols. There's that thing you can do, drilling numbers down to their digital roots: $1+8+8+1 = 18$, so $1+8 = 9$. And that's the root of it: 9. See? It's the biggest digit we can get to before it jumps to zero again, but does it jump or does it just come full circle and we start again, like the hands of a watch as they close to midnight, then start again – that watch you saw on another night like this, or rather in the dreaming of it. Or did you? How can you be certain?

But if you are certain, is that what she's telling you?

Who?

The woman in the blue dress with the hair from 1881.

But it's just an artefact of our base ten numbering system. And to a mathematician there's any number of numbering systems. Yes, but they all loop back to zero, don't they? And we use base ten because it's convenient, and because we have ten fingers, right? Base ten is

our thing. A distinctly human thing. It's symbolic to us, right?

Wait, how do you know all this number stuff?

Okay... you have this feeling you're an engineer, or you used to be. You built things, once. Worked things out. They teach engineers a lot of number stuff. But maybe that's all gone now, and no longer relevant to you, at least in so far as any specific experience is relevant to the remembering of oneself. We are not *that*, not the literalness of it anyway, rather we are the custodian of our own experience, and defined more by what we see of ourselves reflected in it, like your face reflected in the window glass just now, and only the darkness beyond.

And while you've been reflecting on all of that, you've drawn a bottle, half hidden in grass. Another puzzle to be reflected on. You hear a pure note, like someone blowing over the open neck, and like a genie come to serve you, the connecting door opens and she's standing there, looking at you, the woman from downstairs, an eyebrow raised in query. She's wearing a long nightgown, and there's this scent of something holy.

Beyond her, in the soft light of a candle, this being the flickering light of another age, you see her bed, the sheets turned down and ready to slide into. There's something about the bed that makes you ache for sleep, to sleep in a bed like that, with her – just sleep, though, curled into an embrace, secure in the fact of your own existence as evidenced by the loving press of another's warm skin.

And speaking of skin, she would make for a very Victorian nude, obviously. And that definitely means something to you from some waking time, past or present. You realise you have the camera at your elbow, or at least a representative of it, and you wonder if she'd model for you. Then, as if by way of answer, she holds up a key, key to her door and, seemingly without moving, lays it in the fold of your notebook. No, she saying. Forget that now. This is far more important. This is what it's all about.

This key.

You take it up, the key, and you tell her you don't understand.

"Of course you don't" she says. "It's not about understanding. It's an invitation to begin."

"To begin what?"

"Thinking about it."

But all you're thinking about is what she might look like undressed, and she knows it, and she's disappointed by that, shakes

her head, then closes the door on you, seals herself in. Then the key has gone, and so has the door. At once you fear the loss of an opportunity that might never arise again, and you pine for it. You feel she's misjudged you too because you did not want sex, at least not merely the huffy-puffy kind. You wanted more, and could she not see that in you? And if she could not, then she was not the woman you thought she was anyway, and why, for just once in your life, could she not be the goddess you want in her.

Except this is not life, is it? This is more a perspective removed, one that embraces a thing you no longer have any clear view of. Only symbols remain, like the tidal twists that tug a boat this way and that. 1881 boils down to 9, but in another system, something to do with the personalities of beings, there are nine types, and the ninth is a mediator.

You're not sure how you know that. Maybe it's from another time, when you're not an engineer, maybe even another life, but you know a mediator brings together all the parts of yourself, so don't make the mistake of wanting to fuck that either or you'll remain scattered to the four winds. So just leave her be, Chris – it is Chris, isn't it? Just think about it, like she says.

You feel a shiver then and you know you're waking, not that you want to sleep through till dawn, because you still don't know the price, nor if the landlord is truly as benign as he seems, or if there's a darker edge and a trapdoor somewhere to a cellar where the debtors are sent, and where the dreams are void even of candlelight. Maybe the best you can hope now is that you remember some fragments of it, carry them through to be pondered in your waking life.

Open yourself to mediation, Chris, and see what happens.

You sip the whiskey, thinking it might help you to hold on, but it tastes sour now, smells sour too, like old clothes.

Chapter Eight

Sure, like old clothes, and like the smell of that little attic room where you had your studio, if you can call it that. Do you remember? Is this the nineties now? You're at the university, reading psychology, and feeling a little old for a student, but what the hell? You've got to do something with your life, and even starting from scratch at twenty seven means you could still have your PhD by thirty five, and that leaves a lot of life still to be lived and worked and pondered over. I know, you're thinking you should have done electronics and computers, even though you've discovered you have an affinity for the head stuff – gifted to you from another life almost. The main problem for you though is all of the other students are girls, and none of them speak to you, but you tell yourself that's fine; you're here to work, not screw around like everyone else seems to be doing. It's your seriousness of purpose, you suppose, that sets you apart, that lets you down. It always has, but more so in this den of callow youth, this life of the university campus.

Sure, the work comes easy, even the mathematics, born of another age during your engineering studies. It opens doors on the statistical nature of behavioural experiments and data analysis, doors the others find hard to open even a crack. But it's not the behaviours of the herd that interests you so much as the demons driving the individual, and your individual demons in particular. And isn't that where you meet Charlotte? C*all me Charlie* – that crazy, pale faced, flame haired chancer of a woman: a tutor, not a student, though not *your* tutor.

It's her idea, faking French postcards of a certain sort. You recall one semi drunken conversation with her in the bar of the Student's Union. Next thing she's recruited you as her photographer. She has a printer with the skills of a forger do the rest. She finds the girls, the clothes the props. There's never any shortage of willing girls, by the way, though it's Charlie doing the asking, not you. Sure, it might have been a different story if it had been you. Not all girls have the figure for it –Victoriana, I mean. That's a very specific thing, the Pre-Raphelite look, what would, even in the nineties have been called fat, but Charlie's an artist and she has the eye.

You still have some of those postcards, kept as souvenirs, which

suggests a past tense thing going on here, a nostalgia sort of thing, even as you frame this next shot, focus squarely on this cute girl's huge Rubinesque behind. She's looking at you over her shoulder, flowers in her hair, pale make-up, red cupid-bow lips that'll tone up in print just a few shades from black. Face in soft focus - emphasis on the erogenous, but no genitals please which are, actually, quite ugly Chris - *so says Charlie* – and we're not, you know, shooting porn here.

You're thinking, actually, after everything you once said about sticking to landscapes, a girl's body isn't unlike a landscape in the curves of it. There's also something Victorian in that big hair of the early nineties, not exactly the same, but Charlie has an eye for that too, spends a long time working with wigs and extensions, and when she's finished with them these girls look as close to the past as the real thing.

Sure, this isn't your forte, not really. What you're still after is that mark of timelessness you only get with a wild bit of land, but you're not doing this for philosophical reasons. You're doing this for Charlie because she's sexy and when you're with her you're no longer thinking of Jen.

You use one of Charlie's stockings and Vaseline swirled over a plain Cokin filter to fake that early hand-ground vignetting lens-look. Getting the lighting right's a matter of improvisation too, and since you've no money for pro studio equipment, you rig up something crude with car head-lights, and sheets of paper for reflectors. Sepia toning at the printer's does the rest. But when you look at those postcards now, for all everyone's efforts they still look like nineties girls to you, just like in all that neoclassical art, they're obviously Victorians dressed in togas. Still, there's something haunting about the memory of those days, and the results are convincing enough to shift some stock, and you wonder if you shouldn't give up on all this psychology business and try being the pro-photographer you always wanted to be instead.

But it's a niche market, and once you've paid the printer and covered your essentials you never make a bean at it, or if you do, Charlie doesn't let on and you wouldn't put it past her because the first thing you learned about Charlie, was never to trust her, even though she let you have the key to her flat. And there's a lesson in that – the photography I mean, and not the key, though there may be a lesson in that too, if you could only unravel it. They say you

should follow your passions in life, but your passions rarely lead to the means of supporting a life. But then neither should you give up on them, because it's your passions that are integral to the meaning of your life and without them you might as well be dead.

Okay, there's something about that key, isn't there? It's been like a recurring theme for a while. You still have it, don't you? Though you've not seen Charlie for a long time, and you heard she'd moved on – costume and period designer for the BBC now. So you're definitely thinking back on all of this from some waking reverie. Or something. How long? A decade? Two? Are we past the millennium yet? Have we set the middle-east afire? Are the skies thick with delivery drones? Are we all plugged into our devices and the machines reading our faces? Do you still sit in the room that was your boyhood bedroom, receiving clients by hologram?

You were such a bad girl, Charlie. But on the upside, she did show you a lot of girls undressed, more girls than you've ever seen in your life. And sometimes there'd be that flicker in her eye as she watched those sessions, and you'd know it was turning her on and then you'd do that thing students and tutors should never do, but you're of an age, and you've had this aching boner like for ever while you framed those shots, and for all her faults Charlie was ever so good at that sort of thing.

And she was your first, surrounded by all that Victoriana. Is it any wonder then you so fetishise the past, and the Victorian in particular?

But why the key? What sort of symbol is that? What does it unlock? Doorway to the erotic? Nah, maybe you can kid yourself while you're young that brief moment of coital oblivion is the opening to your life's purpose, but it's less so as you age. The lack of opportunity when you're old grants you some perspective on it and, looking back, it seems more like nature's bait, a thing that renders you compliant in the process of making babies, which no one in their right mind would attempt otherwise, given the hardships later on and which are generally hidden from you until you're elbow deep in shit and you've gone days without sleep.

Try remembering your moment of post-coital oblivion then, and tell me it means anything!

Chapter Nine

Okay, here it is again, that symbol, that key. It's coming at you across the bar as the landlord slides it over. It has to mean something!

"Room's all ready for you, sir."

"Thanks."

"And will it be the usual, sir?"

He's asking this even as he pours out the Old Fettlecairn, and the scent of it's calling to mind a bottle tangled up in grass. You un-snag it, take it up, turn it in the light. It's empty and you want to pull the cork, see if there's a trace of scent but, with a sudden clarity that's lacking in your waking life, you know there's a genie inside and you hope you've the sense not to actually pull out that damned cork. And why? Because then you'd be down the rabbit hole, and nothing would ever make sense to you again, though it might keep nagging you to try.

"Em... usual, yes. Thanks."

He winks at you. "Put it on the tab then, shall we?"

On the tab? How many times now? Or is this just the once, the one dream, the dream that tells you you've dreamed it all before, over and over, and how would you know, I mean if your brain's rinsed clean each night, of the truth? Or is it more the illusion of a linear life you're losing when you sleep, and in here the realisation is dawning that everything happens at once, and events that might seem to you staged decades apart are all integral to the same act, and only when they're considered together, as a whole, do they actually mean anything, in the whole. And only in here can such a mess of events make any kind of sense at all.

Is your dream the key to understanding all of that, or is the story of the dream an integral part of the story of your life? Can the one not exist without the other?

"Yes... on the tab, sure. Thanks."

Except why should this mean anything at all? Just because it's a recurring dream, doesn't mean it's important, does it? It doesn't make it a puzzle to be solved. I mean, if it *is* a recurring dream, and the dream isn't just telling you that.

Now wait...

There's a girl at your table and you may have met her before:

long legs and shorts and a big hiking pack. She looks flushed from a day in the sun, her hair all tangled and sweaty. You'd like to ignore her, but she's at your table, as much as anything belongs to you in here, or maybe since you're dreaming it, it all belongs to you. But what if you're not dreaming it? What if she is? There's a watch on the table and she's toying with it, a big silver lump of a thing.

"It's English," she says, as you sit down. And then she asks if you'll take her picture, but you've left your camera somewhere and you can't remember where, and that makes you anxious because that camera's a classic and it means a lot, and you'd like to take her picture with it to see if you can carry it through to waking life, then compare it with all the others you might or might not have kept. And maybe that's the reason you feel you know her, and then you'll know if you've seen her before or not. And if you've not, then you're dreaming her from your soul, which is in itself significant. Except of course, nothing you do here can be carried through to anywhere else. You can only keep the moods and the feelings this purely symbolic life throws up.

You tell her the watch looks like one that belonged to some old guy who was in here before.

"No, it's mine," she says, and then she points out the time: Quarter past nine.

You remark on the symmetry. "Except it's not quite symmetrical is it?"

"Oh?"

"It has to be nearer fourteen minutes past, then the angles of the minute and the hour hand are the same. I mean when measured from either the vertical or the horizontal axis"

"I see."

"It's only at midnight the difference closes down to nothing."

"And what happens at midnight?"

"You grant me three wishes."

"Really? How so?"

"Because you're a djinn who came out of an old whiskey bottle."

"Okay, well, just supposing I am, what'll your first wish be?"

"That you'll grant me more wishes than just the three."

"Ah, clever. Except it's never wise, trying to outwit a djinn. We always find a way of making you regret it."

A Djinn?

Yes. Arabic word.

Ghost. Spirit.

It's where the word Genii comes from. And you've read somewhere the only way to frighten a djinn is to remove your clothes, then it thinks you're capable of shedding your skin, which makes you a more powerful demon than it, so it'll leave you alone. Except you're shy and she's beautiful, and you don't want to scare her, so you'll accept your three wishes like anyone else, but make sure your last one is to insist she gets back in that bottle because a djinn isn't the sort of thing you want at large in your life, at least not for the whole of your life.

"Could really use a shower, John."

"You're not staying here?"

"Not booked in, no. Just passing."

"Shower in my room if you like."

You wonder if by saying this you've transgressed against some arcane rule of the Inn. You glance across to the bar to check the landlord's okay with it and, sure, he's fine, gives you the nod, even a little thumbs up and a wink. But then you wonder, something at the back of your mind, something telling you your name's not really John, that it's just a disguise you use to cover up who you really are and you should never come to the Inn at the Edge of Light, thinking you know who you really are, and since you've forgotten who that is, it's better to play it safe, which is why you call yourself John. But while it might be okay for John to invite a girl up to his room to shower, a girl who might be a djinn, maybe it's not so wise for the other fellah.

Him being a mere mortal and all.

Chapter Ten

It's warm in the hut, comfortable; there's a sweet peaty smell, and a cosy light from the fire. Jen's unrolled her bag and she's sitting cross legged on it, combing out her hair, the knife lying flat between her knees, pointing away from her and almost phallic. Her hair reaches all the way down to her waist and somehow her combing it sparks up the electricity in that intimate little space.

"Not shy are you?" she asks.

Shy? Of course you are. You're twenty six and yet to know a woman's touch –tremble even at the thought of it.

"Sorry," you tell her. "Not much for company. Never was."

"Well... me neither. Got that in common then. Should get on like a house afire."

Her face is weather-tanned, legs muscular. Her boots, which she's left by the door, have the look of many seasons in their deep cracks and creases. You know you haven't seen her before, but there's this haunting certainty that you should know her, that you've always known her.

So anyway, she's spent a lot of time walking, done all the big trails you reckon: the Tyrol, Mont Blanc, the Karakoram, and she's maybe even just bagged her last Munro on the mountain here today. She doesn't need to list them all for you. You can see the long miles and the dusty roads in her eyes. She can handle herself all right. You? You're lucky if you make it to Scotland once a year, and even that feels like an outrageous adventure, otherwise you don't know much of the world beyond your own front door, still don't.

What the hell happened to you Chris? Did you really choose this, or did the world impose it on you, turn the lights out one by one, turn everybody into ghosts?

"Is that knife sharp?" you ask.

"Enough to shave the hairs off my legs. Want a feel?"

For an instant you're wondering if she means a feel of her legs, and you blush. She picks up on the double meaning, smiles. Deliberate or not? Who knows, but she avails herself of the opportunity anyway and enjoys playing with you. "I meant the knife, Chris."

"Sure, I knew that. And no. I'm fine. I'd most likely cut myself

with it."

She pulls a tin of soup from her pack, begins assembling her stove. "So what have you got?"

"Got?"

"To eat."

"Oh, Ravioli. Chunk of bread."

"Eugh! Ravioli. Wouldn't mind a piece of your bread though. I've only got crackers left. Any chance? Swap you for a piece of cheese?"

"Sure, welcome."

"Thanks. Been up the hill yet?"

"No."

"Planning to?"

"Not really."

Except a part of you wants to say, yes, *of course I've been up the hill*. It's the manly thing to do, after all, and here she is, this beautiful woman you're already imagining has bigger balls than you. It's bad enough you've not been up the hill yet, but that you don't intend going at all, well – what chance do you think you stand of impressing her? No muscles, no hairs on your chest.

No balls.

Loser.

Wait... you want to impress her, Chris?

Well of course you do.

But this isn't your usual kind of boy-girl encounter is it? No fancy, elaborately contrived cute-meet – not with a knife as big as that between you. I mean, it's contrived in a way – of course it is – but different rules apply, a different etiquette. God knows how you've landed in this situation. The last thing you remember is blowing a note from the top of an empty whiskey bottle, and suddenly you're in all of this beautiful and slightly erotic strangeness up to your neck.

Okay, so break it down: you're fellow travellers in the wilderness, sharing the only shelter there is. She just happens to be a girl, and this is 1987 for pity's sake, not 1887. There are no issues of impropriety. Still, it's going to be challenge enough just to get through the night with her sleeping across from you, though in what sense, other than sheer embarrassment, you can't say. Except, sure you can, Chris – it's like it always is in the presence of a woman: you're juggling the usual glass shards of a repressed sexual

angst, and cutting your fingers every time, as surely as you would juggling her knife.

Weird, don't you think? You come all this way for solitude, and you end up spending the night with one of the most beautiful women you'll meet in your entire life. And sure, your life's just starting out in earnest now, but already you know this is true, like deep inside of you there's a memory of the whole sweep of things, a story already written in this girl's eyes, that you're never going to meet anyone like her, ever again, so you'd better make the most of it and not screw it up.

Again.

"Can't have been much of a view from up there anyway," you tell her. "I mean in the mist and everything."

"Not much," she says. "But I didn't climb it for the view."

"Ah, right. No one does, I suppose."

"Oh? So... you get that, do you?"

"Think so."

"What are you about then? You a photographer, or something?"

"Not really. I shoot landscapes, like seeing what I can see in them." Would she get that, you wonder? Probably not. No one has so far. "All the better ones have the hill in the frame, not framed from the hill."

Ah, now didn't that feel like a clever thing to say?

Sure, you realise for the first time you actually said something you totally believe in – not just *thought* it, but actually *said* it – and that really underlines a thing, you know? What's more she seems to approve, nods sagely.

"Landscape photographer, then. Interesting. Much money in that?"

"No, it's just a hobby. I tried going pro once, but it didn't work out."

"Oh?"

"Thought I could quit the day job, do something really different, something that would let me spend my life exploring places like this instead of being tied to a drawing board. Went through a spell of sending photos out to walking magazines, but they've not used any of them. I guess with the right contacts you could scrape a living at it, but if you're coming from the outside like me, you can pretty much forget it."

"Ah... same can be said for the whole of life, Chris. But then all

of us are coming at that from the outside. Anyway, it still sounds like you're a landscape photographer at heart to me. You're just unknown, and have the extra Kudos of not giving a damn about it any more."

"Ha. Maybe."

"Maybe nothing. You see through your eyes, rather than just with them."

Something in you lights up when she says that, because William Blake (ancient poet) said it before her! "You know Blake?"

"Sure. *Tyger, Tyger burning bright,* and all that... but he's kind of off piste for most people these days."

"Who says? I like him. He said if you see through the eye you see more than just what's there. You see other things too, things that aren't literally there but which are none the less real because the imagination makes them so. That makes sense to me, makes sense of why we feel certain things when we look out at a landscape. If you see *with* the eye, all you see are objects, then the world becomes kind of two dimensional, and dead. A lie, he called it, seeing like that. You know, using the eye like a camera instead of a window for the soul?"

She gives you a serious look. "Aren't you kind of young to be talking that way?"

"I'm older than he was, when he wrote it."

"True. But people grew up so much more quickly in his day. Had to. You were most likely dead by forty. Have you ever thought though, how a camera is a mechanical eye? All it sees is what's in front of it. It's a literal kind of device, but the act of using a camera can open up the inner eye, and then we see through it. It's not the camera that does the trick. It's more the mind behind it. But then again Blake saw fairies. Do you see fairies too, Chris?"

You hesitate to tell her, that yes... sometimes you do see fairies.

"What if I'm a fairy and you're seeing one now?" she teases.

"Well, I'd better be careful."

"Damned right." She laughs. "But I like you, so it's okay. So what's your *actual* day-job then? You said something about a drawing board?"

"Yes, draughtsman. Tool design. I mean I was. Firm went bust last year, and no one's hiring now. Looks like Engineering's finished. You?"

"Oh... I travel. Work in bars and such, save a little money, then

move on. Just come back from Marrakech. High Atlas." She sighs, weary, philosophical now and she gives you a look as if to judge how receptive you might be, and then she says: "Don't you ever get the feeling it's all over, actually? I'd settle to something more solid, I really would, except there's no firm ground any more. It's been a weird decade so far, and a strange year. It's like a machine going too fast and it's all ready to fly apart. Nothing good can come out of this any more, Chris, at least not for me it can't. I've already had my peak experience, and it all seems down hill from here."

"Sure, I feel that too. But maybe every generation feels it. It's part of the human condition. But things will pick up."

"How do you know?"

"They always do. Things fall apart, then they pick up, then they fall apart again."

"But what if this time it's different? What if we've given birth to a monster we can't control, and it's going to eat us? So much greed now, Chris. People scrabbling about for money and waving it in the faces of others who don't have it. It's going to break the whole planet. It's the only logical outcome of the path we're on."

"I get that, but why so bleak?"

"We nailed it earlier: nobody knows how to see through their eyes any more. All they see are objects. And every object's got its price. People too. And the world's becoming a machine that doesn't value people. We're nothing, Chris. You and I, sitting here in this place, a place so beautiful it makes your heart ache. But we're skint. Me by choice, you by misfortune, so the world would rather squash us flat than listen to a damned word we say."

Sure, the eighties had been a vulgar decade: a kind of conspicuous money-worship, and everyone going around puffing themselves up, flaunting their fake identities and posturing at one another, one delusion to another. There were suddenly so many plastic people, those with money and those who liked to pretend they'd money. So yes, she was right, it looked all set to burst, no denying that. The miners were broken, the pits were shutting, the unions were being picked apart by a steady de-industrialisation, and you'd think people would have had enough of that, yet Thatcher had just won her third term, and the housing market which had long since run ahead of you, at least in your present circumstances, looked set to crash and take a lot of people with it.

"What chance has anyone got in a world like that, Chris?"

"I'm sure things will work out. Things will change, yes, but not all of them for the worst."

"You think? Such as?"

"Well, my job was starting to be done on computers – technical drawing, I mean. It's a pity I'm missing all of that, being out of work just now. No one needs guys who fly drawing-boards any more. But I'm thinking computers are going to be a big part of the future, and I mean everyone's future. I'm thinking I should go back to college, actually, retrain as a programmer. It would be something to be a part of that."

"Maybe, but computers just deal with objective facts, Chris. They don't see fairies. And you can't trust anyone who says there's no such thing as fairies." She's smiling, teasing again, but you know what she means. It's not so much the believing in them as the wanting to. And those who want to aren't mad. It was like believing in God. You didn't have to, but your life generally went better if you secretly allowed some space in there for God to *be*.

"So what would you do," you ask her. "I mean if you ever found some firm ground to settle down in?"

"Got to make a living in the world as you find it, I suppose. World breaks, people break. There's an explosion in mental health problems, you know? And we're churning out Prozac like there's no tomorrow. This scramble for loot... it makes you mean, and it makes you crazy. So it seems to me someone who can mend minds is never going to be short of something to do. You should be a healer too, Chris."

"Doctor, you mean? Hell, that's a tough course. I'm not cut out for that."

"From the way you talk it sounds to me like you're already half way there. I'm a clinical psychologist. Don't know whether to teach or go into practice, so I'm travelling while I make my mind up. Probably do a bit of both, or more likely I won't do either, just keep on travelling till I run out of road."

You don't ask her what she means by that: running out of road. She cuts a slice from your loaf, slices a wedge of her cheese for you in return, hands it to you on the tip of her blade.

Clinical psychologist? Better mind your step then Chris, or she'll have you down as weird.

"Always a funny silence when I tell people that," she says.

"I wonder why."

"Don't worry. You sound sane enough. It's me who's the crazy one. If you knew me as well as I do, there's no way you'd be spending the night under the same roof. Anyway... wanna go look for shellfish later?"

"Shellfish?"

"Haven't lived till you've picked your supper from off a beach in the Hebrides."

You suspect she's right about that. Indeed there seems something of infinite value in it, so much so the very loss of the concept, of the simple beauty of it, could do nothing but irreparably damage us.

So, later on you're down by the sea, hopping about among the rock-pools while the sun sets, and suddenly it doesn't matter you've no job, no future, no anything. The western sky's ablaze, and the shadows are deepening while you collect winkles in your hat, and for company you've got Jen. She's out ahead, legs taut as she balances on the rim of crystal rock-pools and gazes in like she's reading her future. Suddenly, you've never felt freer in your life, never will again, never be so ecstatic in the company of another. You know this. For sure, you know it.

And what's more, she trusts you, this woman, she's been inside your head and she understands what she's seen and she likes you all the more for it. You need never feel guilt at your strangeness when you're with a woman like this, Chris. Except, she's just a woman, remember, and what you're feeling about her is something coming from inside of you.

What you're seeing and feeling isn't real, not in the usual sense, because you're seeing through your eyes and what you're seeing is indeed overlaid with a sprinkle of fairy dust that's welling up from the depths of your soul, which makes it more than real. And though all of that sounds marvellous to you, like falling in love, there's a part of you urges caution because she might be a djinn, summoned from out of an old whiskey bottle and you'd better be careful, because once freed there's no way she's spending centuries trapped in there again.

But right now of course you don't care, and you don't care either if there are only a hundred bothies in the whole of the British isles, or if you ever finish photographing them. All that matters is that your quest was the strange means to the end that brought you all the way here... to this one.

While you're poking around for shellfish, you see the curl of

something metallic among the pebbles. It's a piece of decorative chain. You draw it out, tug up whatever's on the end of it. It's a small key, like the key to a padlock. Its old, but it's made of brass, so it's withstood a lot of weathering.

Jen is with you now, so close you can smell her, feel her breath on your neck.

"What you got there?"

"Key."

"Pretty."

You hold it out for her to take. "Souvenir," you tell her.

"Wonder what it opens."

You think about saying something corny like: "Key to my heart," but you bite the words off in time. You've to spend the night together yet and you don't want her think you're going all juvenile on her, or worse: transgressing the rules between fellow travellers into creepiness. But something in her eye tells you she heard loud and clear, and you're embarrassed because you want her to think you're something special, and not just some other jackass hoping to get his end away. Neither do you want her thinking you're a virgin, still giddy for his first time, and especially with a woman like her.

Like her?

What do you mean 'like her' Chris?

You mean she's regal, scared of nothing. You'd follow this woman into battle, and only this woman, otherwise you'd sooner keep a low profile and hope life doesn't notice you, because anything its got to offer can only be second rate compared to the life you want, which is a life with this woman in it, or a woman like her, a woman you've summoned by the lament of your fragile heart and to whom you've just given the key to everything.

"Key to my pants," she says, then smiles, winks at you, pushes it deep into her pocket. "Make a wish and maybe I'll let you have it back."

Which kind of makes your own reticence a moment ago seem rather quaint, doesn't it? It also brings your high flown words crashing back down to her unashamed earthiness. And though you do indeed wish it, wish it with all your heart, you know that would be one wish gone, and wasted, and she's not really flirting with you, is she? She's just teasing, and a gentleman should be able to tell the difference. So what you say next, like pretty much everything we say to others, is going to determine the course of the rest of your

life.

Better choose those words carefully then, Chris.

Chapter Eleven

You're on that bit of road again, and the inn's up ahead and the light's going, but you're not alone this time. The old guy's with you, sucking on his pipe. And he's moving slowly as befits a man of his years but you're worried he's not going to keep up and you need to get to the inn before the light goes, because God knows what will happen then if you're still outdoors. But you're loath to leave him behind because that doesn't feel like the decent thing to do, so you gather your courage, let go of your anxieties and your feelings of time running out and you drop your pace to match his.

Then he pauses and his expression suggests he's about to say something profound, but instead he puffs out a great cloud of tobacco.

"Keeps the midges away," he says.

This is different then, or at any rate the dream's telling you it's different, and it's telling you something else too, in little dribs and drabs, something about your waking life, letting in enough of it to suggest you've been reading up on dreams, and the dreaming of the stranger ones, and how it's okay to ask questions of the characters you meet, if you've a mind to, and you're lucid enough to remember. So, here goes...

"I hope you don't mind my asking, but who are you? I mean in relation to my own self."

"Oh, I'm your quest for wisdom and meaning," he says, straight off. Just like that. "Not wisdom or meaning *itself*, you understand. That's always a woman. I'm just your quest for it. And that's always a man, an older man."

"Okay... so you're saying you don't actually know anything? You're just searching for knowledge?"

"Well, you don't get to my age without picking up some useful gems along the way. But it's joining the dots I have trouble with, attaining a perspective on the bigger picture. That's normal. That's human. Genuine wisdom is always supernatural."

"You said it was always a woman."

"Yes... a supernatural woman. Not an ordinary woman, mind. Ordinary women are what men too often take for supernatural beings, and that can be a real problem of course, for both of you. That's why you need to be careful with women, especially when

you're young."

"So... she can help me with that?"

"Who? With what?"

"The girl with the backpack? And my quest for life's meaning."

"Oh... her. I'm sure she's wise enough in her own way, but no. She represents something else and you'll have to ask her about that. But you'd be better off just making love to her, if she'll let you."

"Then the other woman?"

"There's *another* woman?"

Yes, there's another woman. Somewhere. You're sure of it, but you can't remember clearly now. She has a key as well, like the girl with the backpack has a key because you gave her one, while this other woman gave it to you, but you returned it, or you misunderstood what it was for, and it disappeared... or something. Except the girl still has it, your key, I mean, and she's up there in your room now peeling off her clothes and having a shower, the key's lying there on its chain curled up, snake-like, in a fold of her discarded, yet ever so erotic pants.

So you're willing the old guy along because he's right and you should have made love to her. And maybe that's what the key is, like permission to enter or something, except for the other woman, when it means something different, but what? Honestly, you no longer care; you just want to see the girl taking a shower, and maybe if you're lucky then she'll let you enter that cool, fresh wetness of her body, and all its queer promises of enlightenment.

But the old guy can't move any faster and you're trying to up the pace a little, but it has him wheezing, and you can't leave him behind because he's your quest for wisdom after all, and you can't abandon your sincerity in that quest or the ground will open at your feet and all the bats of Hell will be let loose around your head.

"Are you afraid of the dark?" he asks.

Well of course you are, but you won't admit it. "There are no street-lights," you tell him. "We could stumble on the road."

"I have some matches, if we need them." He smiles, something wry about it. "Unless you're in a hurry over something else?"

"Em... no. It's fine. I'm not about to leave you behind."

"Ah... now that's a good answer," he says. "I'm deeply comforted by that."

"Still, a single match isn't going to light our way very far, is it?"

"Well, that's always been true," he says. "But we have a lot

matches to go at." He pulls out a box of Swan Vestas. It doesn't look like a lot of matches, but this is a dream after all so anything's possible.

Finally you make the inn and your drink's waiting like it always is, and though you want nothing more than to skip up to your room now, the old guy's settling down at your table, pulling his watch up from the depths of his waistcoat. Five past eleven, or thereabouts, it says – symmetry again, something fearful about it, the scissor hands closing down.

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright...

But the question you're asking yourself is: is she there or not? It's eating a hole in your soul, not knowing and then wanting it so much, but you manage a breath and you know that in the calmer reading of things, actually, what you're supposed to do right now is ignore all of that carnal urgency, and sit down with him, no matter how annoying you find him... I mean his riddles about time and all that, which may or may not mean anything at all.

"So, you dream you're getting on an aeroplane," he says.

"What?"

"An aeroplane. It crashes. Then you wake up and realise you've an aeroplane to catch, but the dream's left you scared to fly, so you don't fly."

"Okay, with you so far... so what happens next?"

"The aeroplane crashes."

"Ah, right."

"So tell me, in the dream, did you see your future?"

"Well how could I? If I had, I wouldn't have been able to change it by not getting on the aeroplane."

"But what if we have more than one future?"

"Ah, that old thing. You mean all the possibilities exist, including one where we crash, and one where we don't? That needs a big universe. And more universes than a man can count – and every one the same, universes coming out of their ears every time they so much as sneeze."

"Well, why not?"

"It's impossible?"

"Oh? How so? Is the universe infinite or not?"

"Well... so far as we can guess, I suppose..."

"Well there we are then. Room for as many universes as we want. And then some. Now that would be interesting, wouldn't it?

That would bypass the intervention paradox, and lead to all sorts of mischief." His eyes sparkle as he rubs his hands together with a sort of maniacal glee. "Plausible mischief, though. What do you think about that?"

"Well, it's an interesting idea, but when you say *plausible*... is it really? I mean..."

"Oh, Lord knows," he says.

"It would also be terrifying, wouldn't it?"

"How so?"

"You've already told me time has no meaning – at least I think that was you – we can read it back to front and upside down, that it's just a false impression we have that it seems to move in one direction. And now you're telling me anything that can happen will happen, but if that's true we can be anything, do anything, and the fact there's no limitation of any kind on us makes the idea of existence kind of pointless, doesn't it?"

"You think?"

"Well, what kind of being can exist under those conditions? We'd all be permanently freaked out."

"We would?"

"There could be an infinite number of variations in the way our lives play out, and if time doesn't really flow from past to future but hangs around in a weird, permanent 'now', that means every moment in that infinite number of life-variations is available for access to some higher part of us. But... Hell, we'd be smeared out across the entire universe. What kind of being could make sense of that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Who's to say what we might be capable of, if we can attain a certain perspective, like getting promoted at work, from humble researcher to department head? And perhaps our limitations lie elsewhere, in our responses perhaps. Like yours just now."

"Mine? Just when?"

"Thinking that maybe there's this girl in your room, wearing nothing but a towel, and that she won't be there for long and you'd better hurry if you want to catch her, yet you take a deep breath and sit down with a confusing old fart like me, because it's the polite thing to do, and you don't want to offend my sensibilities because you're a nice guy, but also because you wonder if you might learn something, though most of the time I just wind you up

with the questions I pose and the nonsense I speak in reply to yours. But then wisdom is partly grubbing about in the mud for the right questions to ask, isn't it?"

You're granted an image of yourself grubbing about in mud. You're by the sea and you're searching for winkles. *Winkles?* Did you dream of that another time? or has it leaked through from memory? But a memory of what? A dream, or something real? Or is the dream just telling you it's real, and then how would you know?

You find a piece of chain, and on the end of it's a key.

Another damned key!

The old guy holds the watch close and gives the crown a wind. But now you're thinking the watch he had before was an old English Lever, from 1881, though you don't know how you know that, except the number means something to you from somewhere else and there's definitely a Victorian vibe to all of this that's driving you mad. But what you do know is you don't wind an English lever of that vintage from the top, because it has no crown. You open the back and insert a key. And you don't know if that's meaningful or just a quirk of the dream, or even if there's such a thing as a quirk and that all things here are symbolic of something else, except here the symbol is presented by its absence.

The key, I mean.

Okay?

No,..

By now that key is sounding like a bit of a McGuffin, that it doesn't really mean a damn, other than to string you through the plot of your life, or even your many lives lived out in parallel, that it's beyond what you're feeling when you try to think of its meaning. And maybe the old guy's right, it's your feeling and your responses that determine the limitations set on your life and grant meaning to it, rather than the details of that life anyway which could be infinite in their variety and still mean as much of nothing as a more ordinary kind of life. They're both just the ground of being on which you dance.

The details, Chris. Don't get lost in the details, lest you encounter the devil.

What?

"Omega," he says. "They were streets ahead of us by this time."

"Who?"

"The Swiss. They made this watch. It's an Omega. See?"

He points out the Omega symbol on the dial. You're not sure of the significance of this. "Ah, the alpha and the omega."

"Which would be Greek, of course."

"Signifying what?"

"The beginning and the end."

But this is too much now; your head's starting to spin and you fear the dream is fading. He sits back a little, as if not to crowd your mind. You have to leave, you have to see if she's up there in your room, because a bit of deep-dream-eroticism is the only thing that's going to wash away this ache. He offers you the watch as you rise.

"Take it," he says. "I have another."

You realise you're wearing a waistcoat now, like he is, tweed and old, like in a picture of your grandfather you'd forgotten you had, but of which the dream now conveniently reminds you. The watch fits nicely against the gut, the unfussy albert loops through the buttonhole, girdles you, confers something upon you. A step change. A level of confidence and steadiness you did not have before, and you've no idea what you did to earn it.

You climb the stairs wondering about that, find the room unlocked, a towel neatly draped upon the bed. There's a scent of soap, but she's no longer here. You take the watch from your pocket, give the crown a speculative wind but the spring is already tight, and it's still five minutes past eleven.

It's the other woman you want now, and you look for the connecting door but it's not there.

It's always a woman, he said.

But not just any woman: a supernatural woman.

Chapter Twelve

So it's five past eleven, or thereabouts. It rings a bell, something significant about the shape of the fingers. Except it's morning, symmetry of night, or it's mirror or something like that, and it's not the *next* morning, could in fact be any old morning, sometime between your dream times and in no particular order of running. Except there must be something to render all things relative here or we're just skittering back and forth through time without an anchor, without meaning.

Let's see:

You're driving out of the city, looking for that favourite bit of green in the Western Pennines, that piece of wild you've known since you were a kid. You have the camera, and for some reason now you've taken to wearing moleskin waistcoats. They're unfashionable, except among the still-landed – and worse, they are embarrassing to your daughters, but they've not wanted to be seen with you in public for a long time now, so it makes no difference.

It was a similar strangeness that drew your eye to eBay and the pocket-watch, a world war two era General Services Trade Pattern – GSTP – with the ministry broad arrow on the back. It's a significant lurch into the past, though you recall in your own past you were always quite modern in your dress and somewhat pernickety over your measurement of time, requiring even the accuracy of a quartz watch to be synchronised daily to the atomic time signal. Odd then you should have been so funny about maintaining that old camera, still scouring the 'Bay for original fifty and twenty eight millimetre prime lenses.

The watch is an Omega, and running well, give or take a minute per day which is close enough for you these days anyway. You'd have it serviced, but all the real watchmakers are dead, or charging Rolex prices, and only tinkerers and bullshitters remain at your level, and you don't trust any of them to meddle with this, what, for a time at least, seems destined to be your measure of the momentum of your own reality – albeit your yardstick now is somewhat inaccurate.

You've got the car on auto, at least while you clear the city – less chance of accidents that way, or so they say. But it's probably more the fact it's a law the car sticks to the speed-limit, and you can't

over-ride it any more. You'd floor it up to Scotland except these modern vehicles just don't have the range in one go, especially old ones like this, and the public juicers are far too vulnerable to mischief be relied upon for serious travel.

And there are drones now, drones everywhere, delivering junk to people who only leave their armchairs to visit the toilet, and otherwise just sit staring at their corner holocoms waiting for a miracle, or at their phones, like they're waiting for the download, or the "App" that will explain their lives to them, not realising the damned thing's been sucking their brains out through their ears all along and they can no longer add numbers, let alone figure out what's wrong with their lives, and why the inside of their heads feels so hollow all the time.

Doesn't take much analysis to work that one out, does it?

You're still seeing Bunny off and on, but she looked tired and edgy last time, like she was just going through the motions, like this virtual exhibitionism the two of you've got going is wearing off, and wouldn't it be a hell of a thing to hook up for real and just do it, I mean *for real*, and sure, maybe that would be fun for a while, something to break the monotony, but you know you lack the spirit to see it through, both of you with your minds so clearly on different things now. And that's a pity, especially since your wife moved out, went to live with her mother. And you realise from the slightly skittish way that makes you feel, you've not actually been married for a long time, and then it irks you that you'd stuck it out, the last decade, in that old house and for no more reason than she told you she didn't ever want to leave the city. And then suddenly it's all over, and you really are feeling like, for the whole of your life, you've gone nowhere at all, when you could have been half way round the world.

With Jen.

But more than that you've a feeling everything's over, actually, all of it finished, except you've heard that lament every decade your whole life, heard it every day on the news-feeds. You also heard it once a long time ago, in a conversation you had with that wild-haired girl, and the two of you sheltering in a lone bothy on the Isle of Skaravaig. But for all this talk of things falling down, and yet another potty-mouthed nationalist in Number 10, everything's still here and maybe what it is is that while the machines are moving ever faster around you, you're slowing down, falling asleep. And

where the hell do you find the meaning of your life in all of *that.*

You never did photograph every single one of those bothies, did you, Chris?

Why not?

What was it that robbed you of that sense of purpose?

Did the advent of the damned phone suck your brains out too?

As soon you hit the A6, you take the wheel back from the tin-brain and you open her up a bit, though you wonder why you bother because there's no feel to these cars at all. You remember the days of petrol, and cars that went like the clappers, petrol for sale on every street corner, and enough to take you round the world if you wanted. Now you can't get past Preston without worrying you've not the juice to get yourself back home, and then you've rendered yourself vulnerable to the tow-men who'd rip you off a grand just to see you safe and leave you fucked if you were skint. Sure, these days Scotland might as well be on the moon.

Why Scotland, Chris? Are you still thinking about her? Does she still haunt you? Forget it. You'll be needing a passport and a visa to get up there now, and anyway didn't you read something about Skaravaig being bought up by some rich loony. He flies in by helicopter from his tax-haven, has the place patrolled by a private army for fear of all the people he's screwed over.

It's not the same. Nothing's the same any more and all that stuff you wanted to do? It's moved on, way over the horizon now and you'll never catch up with it.

So you park under the trees, same place you always do, count the bags of dog-shit hanging there; at least some things don't change. You frame them momentarily, wondering if you shouldn't have been photographing the world as it really is all this time instead of how you want it to be, all pristine and perfect and overlaid with that sprinkle of fairy-dust: a curve of hills like the swell of a girl's breast and a valley like the dip of her waist. And then you wonder about Charlie and why she never meant as much to you as Jen, why you never dream of her the way you've dreamed of Jen, even though everything you know of the erotic you learned from Charlie, and all you ever learned from Jen was how to ache for the one damned thing in life you think you need most of all, but know you'll never have.

Answer's easy Chris: once a girl opens her legs for a man, a certain kind of man, it's game over.

Are you that kind of man?

Well, are you, Chris?

Half an hour by your old MOD watch and you're sweaty and breathless, up on the edge of the moors, but they're black and stinking of inferno. A half century ago, they'd be the colour of straw this time of year, and dotted with the little white dancing heads of bog-cotton. But a combination of the climate break-down, bone-dry summers and fools with matches gives rise to an annual burning. And there aren't the fire teams to put them out any more, so they let them burn and the towns at their foot choke each spring.

You'd hoped maybe some green would be showing through by now, and the peewits would be nesting, and the skylarks rising, and the swallows barrelling like they used to do, but all there is is this ravaged mess, and nothing in your imagination can make it any better than it is, nothing can bring the Faery back to sprinkle it with their healing dust. You frame a few shots, but hesitate over the shutter. The camera sees nothing but waste and stays your hand.

Your only chance of reliable green now is the Lakes or the Dales, but the National parks are strictly pay as you go, and manicured beyond what's natural, and the vehicle range thing means an overnight in a secure lodge with juicers you can be sure of, when once upon a time, you could be up and down inside a day and several rolls of film cranked through while you walked ten miles without once having to put your hand in your pocket to pay for something. Now they charge by the hour and the machine takes the money direct from your phone, and if you try to blag it they send a drone to take your picture, and the fine's waiting when you get home.

You wonder if the future was always going to be like this, or if in some way it was your fault for imagining it, even as a possibility, that if only you'd stuck with Jen, none of it would ever have happened and the world would be altogether more beautiful.

Anyway, wasn't it Jen who put you on this path? all those essays on Freud and Jung and Nietzsche, and Goethe, and all the crazy psychoanalysts who followed, and made not one jot of difference to the way things turned out, but only drew your attention to how crazy-ugly it all is, when you might have gone on blithely and not noticed a damned thing, then had yourself quietly lobotomised like everyone else, courtesy of their damned phones.

Is this finally the apocalypse? Is this that dystopia we've all been

expecting, the shock of it softened by endless TV drama depicting it, and the slowness with which it creeps in for real? Have we turned the earth into a machine? Have you? Is all of this *your* fault for not understanding the rules of the game? Sure, you never did understand the rules, Chris – no matter how many times people tried to explain them to you.

Did you?

Chapter Thirteen

Okay, so you're playing darts now, but the board has no numbers, right? A guy spins it like a roulette wheel and when it stops you launch your arrows, aiming for a treble at the top, manage to slot all three of them in. A hundred and eighty, you're thinking and you raise your arms in triumph, punch the air, but your team-mates groan. You've screwed up. While you've been playing one game, they've been playing another entirely.

"So... who are you guys?"

"We're everything you don't know," says one.

"Everything you'll never fathom," says another.

"No sense trying to work out the rules," says another. "Because there aren't any."

"But if there are no rules, how do we know if we're winning or losing?"

"Why would we care?"

"Well... is it not right that we should want to live a good life?"

"Sure, but knowing the rules is only part of that."

"And what's the other part?"

"Playing the game while not minding the fact you'll never know the rules."

"Why can't I learn the rules?"

"Maybe they're too complicated."

"You said earlier there were no rules."

"And maybe there aren't. I mean, how would you know if the rules are too complicated to understand?"

Fair point.

The door opens and in comes the woman in the blue dress. She has a cloak over it tonight, something to keep out the cold, and there's a melodramatic gust of wind that comes in after her, bringing with it a spatter of rain and a rustle of dry leaves.

"Who's that," you ask, but your team-mates all shake their heads in unison and step back as if afraid.

"Don't ask," says one.

"But I thought it was allowed, like I just asked you guys. I mean, what part of me is she?"

"No, really. Don't ask," says another.

"Why not?"

"Because maybe she's not a part of you at all."

"How do you mean?"

"Not everyone in here tonight's a local. We get travellers from all over, you know?"

"How do you tell the difference?"

"Well, does she look local to you?"

No, she doesn't, not dressed like that. But what does that make her? You've asked this question before and there are two obvious possibilities: either she's another dreaming soul come wandering into your head-space, or she's a ghost. There is a third option, a thing to do with divinity, but you're not sure you want to explore that one just yet.

She pulls back her hood, reveals a shock of red hair and green eyes which you're not sure are the same as last time you saw her. But you know it's the same woman like you're certain of everything in here, because the dream is telling you it's so, and then you just know.

As she passes close by she whispers: "Sit with me."

The landlord follows you to her table, but she waves him away. What part of you is the landlord? You keep forgetting to ask. But whoever he is, he knows his place in this lady's presence, so you take his lead and swear to her your deepest respects.

"Yes, yes. So long as you ask me nothing, and do as you're told," she says. "Just sit."

So you sit, and then you remember a slice of life you've forgotten. You don't know if you've suppressed it, or if it's just the dream being selective with what it lets in. You're coming down a mountain. Is there a date? Sure – this is post-millennium, but only just – Summer, 2001. You're a counsellor now, got yourself a poorly paid job with the health service, but it's a start.

So you've cranked through a roll of film, enjoying a day in the green, in the glory-days before they locked it all behind that pay-wall, and you're coming down to the car, thinking of a well earned cup of tea. It's a Volvo, your car, which is a staid and solid and reliable kind of vehicle, and very much in the way you liked to model yourself in those days, except suddenly you're looking up at a hill and you're no longer in your body, but everywhere.

And I mean... *everywhere*.

Pause, and think about that.

Remember it?

Sure, everywhere you look, that's where you are, and even more freaky, that's *what* you are. Are you remembering this now, John? Or is it Chris?

There's a rush, a staggering expansion as your mind fills the void and becomes the universe. And you think: of course, this is the way it's always been, and you remember it now, and there's a feeling of warmth, of being loved, of going home, and then there's a presence, but not embodied... just there, a little behind you and if only you'd known before, you would never have feared a day in your life.

"Wait, that was you?"

"No questions," she says. "But is it any wonder you don't understand the rules."

"I've forgotten that day, dismissed it."

"Why?"

"Because it was too much."

"Exactly, so you told yourself you were ill."

Sure, but you're remembering it now all the more clearly. The Buddhists call that trippy phenomenon "Satori", new agers call it oneness, and it's also a thing you can induce by drugs. But since your brain's just a computer made of meat, you know what you're dealing with here is more likely a malfunction, and anyone who says different is – well – off their heads, which is a disturbing thing to contemplate, that you, a psychologist and counsellor, might be having a psychotic episode, that maybe you're prone to such and what you really need is medication to keep your arms from falling out of your sleeves. And anyway, even if the feeling is true, that you're everything there is, how does that solve the underlying paradox? Because if you're really the centre of things in your own private universe, dreaming your world, so to speak, then who the hell is everyone else?

Are you dreaming them too?

No, that isn't right. Logically, it all falls apart, so then you remember how there was a ripple of fear, like a stone tossed into the smooth surface of a lake, and the vision, the clarity was lost. Then you were back on the trail, your feet burning in your boots. And suddenly the answers didn't seem so urgent any more because you're not sure you could handle the truth, so you locked it away in the secret part of you, and you tossed away the key.

The key?

Yes, the key, Chris, the key!

Plenty of things have scared the pants off you in the past, and you go on asking these damned questions of your own apparently futile existence, while labouring under the delusion you're actually important enough to matter, but in order to answer those questions you have to unlock that part of yourself you've been hiding from, and then you realise how, ever since you've been coming to this place, you've been asked to own that key.

Right on cue she slides a key your way, smiles gently, melts your insides with it. "I'll turn in, I think." And there's something in her honeyed tone that suggests she expects you to turn in with her, so you take the key, and you follow her upstairs.

Chapter Fourteen

You're walking back up to the bothy in the last of the light now, following Jen, picking your way up through the rocks from the beach, and with your hat full of winkles and whelks and other wriggly sea-things and you're going to roast them in a billy-can. So the pair of you will sleep on full stomachs tonight or you'll lie awake the whole of it, sick as dogs. The midges are driving you nuts and you'd think, with all that bare skin Jen would be an even bigger target, but she seems unconcerned.

By the way, you've ducked that joke about having the key to her pants by just smiling and looking dumb, as if the meaning of it went clean over your head, but the thought of it still leaves you feeling faint with excitement. Then, as the bothy comes into view, something strikes her and she laughs. "You're an odd one," she says.

"Oh?"

"Reading Blake. Has no one told you these are post-modern times?"

"Post-modern? Yes, I heard something about that."

Actually, you've only a vague idea what she's on about, but you don't want to sound like a complete idiot. "That's where students set off the fire alarms in college, right? And they spout obscure political buzzwords while running around like infants, and expect to be taken seriously?"

She thinks about this. "Hmmn. By the tone of your voice I can tell that while all that was going on, you wanted peace and quiet so you could cram Newton, or something."

"That's true."

"And you being a Five and all... you might have told those students to grow up, except you're strictly non-confrontational and, deep down, you didn't really care about them, so long as they left you alone."

"That's about it. What do you mean, a five?"

"It's a point on the Enneagram. Something I was studying before I quit to go walkabout. It's a psychological profile thing, though it rests more on the human development side than empirical psychology, at least right now it does, though to be fair there are some convincing correlations with Jung's typology. There are nine Enneagram types you see?..."

"And I'm number five?"

"Yes. You're an observer of life, an introvert, a thinker. You're very self-contained, Chris."

"Okay... that sounds like me. And you're right about the other thing too: I was cramming differential equations the afternoon they set the alarms off. Can't remember why they did that – visit from a government minister or something. Fat lot of good it did, the visit or the alarms. Anyway, how do you know I'm a five?"

"Sticks out a mile. Most types are easy to spot, once you're familiar with the system."

"Oh?"

"Some might mistake you for a four, a Romantic. There are Romantic elements in you. All that Blakean stuff. You see the land overlaid with your imagination. Yet your foundation was the mathematics that came out of the Enlightenment. Plus you seem fairly grounded. I can't imagine you exploding in fits of petulance."

"No, I find emotional outbursts embarrassing, both in myself and others."

"When was the last time you cried?"

"Can't remember."

"So, you're a thinker, a rationalist looking for escape in the Romantic. But you're also fighting a cultural battle that was lost a hundred years ago."

You think on this for a moment. She's really got you nailed, hasn't she? "You're right. I didn't care if those kids grew up or not. I had a proper job. I made things. They just dealt with words and words are cheap, except it was words that had us all thrown out of work in the end wasn't it? Words like 'scab' and 'redundancy' and 'here's your P45'. So I suppose words can be dangerous, even to those of us who don't deal in them."

"I'm not much of a Romantic, " she says. "But then as a doctor, I shouldn't be, having seen how fragile life can be, how fragile the mind is..."

"So, what type are you?"

"Oh, I'm an Eight. Some call that a challenger, others a protector. That makes me over-assertive sometimes, a bit of a bossy britches, always right, even when I'm wrong, so don't take too much notice of me. I want what's best for everyone, whether they like that or not."

But by now you're only half listening, this talk of cultural eras

and personality types and Enneagrams seeming absurd of a sudden with the sun going down behind you in an ecstasy of gold. Instead you've become irrationally anxious that while you were away, some hairy mountain man might have materialised to spoil your cosy one on one with Jen. Because whatever you both are, Fives or Eights or half a dozen of each, you're drawn to what she is and you want her all to yourself, to bathe yourself in her presence, so some of what she's got might rub off on you.

Your heart stops as she pushes open the door and you expect him to be sitting there on your bunk. He's bigger than you, bolder, and he's been up the mountain, unlike you. So then you're bound to sever this connection, because he'll be wanting her and he'll use her knife on you if he has to in order to get to her, and then he'll use it on her when he's done, and you hope Jen can see through all of that, hope she can see what you want from her is more important, more vital for the both of you than what he wants, which is nothing.

Just a shag.

But that's all you want too, isn't it, Chris?

No, you want more than that from Jen. But has she got it? Has she really got what you want? Or do you just imagine it? Are you just projecting a deep-seated need inside of yourself,... onto her?

All right, so there's no one in the hut. You're both still very much alone, and the last spark of sunset is winking out, but the skies don't darken fully here. You're into that strange eternal twilight of the far-northern latitudes, and you're also close enough to the solstice for it not to go properly dark at all tonight. And your mood is coloured now by your stupid imaginings, stupid because tomorrow you'll each be going your separate ways and you'll never see her again for as long as you live, and one day you'll wake up and it'll be half a century gone and you'll still be thinking of her, thinking of this moment and all the angst and the confusion of what it is you want, and what it is you expect, which is everything and nothing at the same time. And what that is, in spite of all the wanting, you really don't know the shape of. If only she could just give it to you, then you might recognise it.

"It's a problem," she says.

"Oh?"

"Truth. We don't know what's true any more do we? All the old certainties are falling away, so we're rejecting everything, even

those things we know to be true."

"Such as?"

"Like... I don't know... that men landed on the moon in '69."

"People doubt that?"

"Sure they do. They think it was filmed in a studio or something and everyone was sworn to secrecy."

"But... that's crazy. Who on earth thinks that? You don't take it seriously, do you?"

"Me? No, but why shouldn't I, if I wanted to? Why shouldn't I question it? That's postmodernism. Always questioning the narrative. I mean, how do we know it wasn't faked? It's like when we're dreaming. Did you ever have one of those dreams you know you've dreamed before, only to wake up and realise it was the dream telling you you'd dreamed it before, but really you hadn't? But in the dream you had to believe it, see? because what other choice did you have? And why would the dream lie to you like that?"

"Because maybe you *have* dreamed it before, but you just forgot. And these postmodernists are wrong. Worse, they're crazy."

"But what if you've really not dreamed it before? And what if, in the same way, in real life, we have this picture of the world we think is true, but actually it's not, and then we find out it's all a lie, but the really crazy thing is, we don't care? We're so used to it we accept it, accept anything then as the truth, even when we know it's a lie. And the stuff that's true,... well, we don't trust it any more than the stuff we know to be lies."

"Why would we do that?"

"Because we can't change the world, Chris. And anyway most of us just want to live our lives, make love, laugh, earn a little money, settle down in a place we can call home. But the foundations of that home are so flimsy now we can't trust in them being around for much longer. And there's nothing we can do about it, so where do we find the meaning of our lives in all of that?"

"I don't know. Same as you, I suppose. In places like this."

"But soon these places will be gone too. And then what? That's our challenge: we've got to make something out of it and not go crazy, and still find some meaning to life."

"It'll be a long time before this place is gone."

"You think so? You know who owns it?"

"No."

"Me neither, but one day it could be some rich loony who chases everyone off with a private army. And there's another island, not that far from here, poisoned with killer anthrax spores they released in World War Two just to see what would happen. And that was modernism for you and a faith in science and look where that got us, so we shouldn't be blaming the postmodernists, because things were racing to a future that was just as uncertain before ever they appeared. And it could all be over any minute – how do you cope with that?"

"With what?"

"Nuclear war! It could happen. I mean, how do you live with the threat of that hanging over you all the time?"

"Same as everyone else: by not thinking about it, and hoping for the best."

"The best?"

"That we'd never be so stupid."

"Oh? So you think we'll still be here in twenty years time?"

"Dunno, but in case we are I'd better find a job because I'll never make a living with my camera."

She laughs, but notes the change in tone, in subject, notes your tug on the line as if to steer away from a thing that's making you uncomfortable and mostly because you don't understand it. But she tugs back, tugs harder, pulls you clean overboard.

"Think you really exist, Chris? Maybe you don't. Maybe you're just this machine with memories and you mistake them for who you think you are."

"I don't know. Do I?"

"I'm asking you? You've got to prove it."

"To you?"

"No, who cares what I think? You've got to prove it to yourself."

"But... what do you think?"

"I really don't know. All I do know is I'm going to India tomorrow."

"Woa! You're flying out to India?"

"Flying? No way. Only got a couple of quid in my pocket – enough for the ferry back to the mainland. Don't know how I'm getting all the way to India yet. Hike a lot of it I suppose, bum rides."

"But... that'll take for ever."

"Sure, but it's not the destination that's important, is it? It's the

journey. Might take years to get there, true, and when I do I'll likely sit on a beach for a week, and get so bored I come straight back, penniless as I am now."

This sounds amazing to you, and brave and slightly stupid, but most of all it sounds like an escape into a way of living that might just have all the answers you crave. So you tell her it sounds amazing, leave out the slightly stupid bit, and then she says: "Come with me, then."

"What?"

"We love places like this because there's nothing more true. And it's the same on the road, on the trail – whatever. There's the destination and the means, and you're never sure of the means. But it's all true, like you know a pebble in your shoe is true."

"A pebble in my shoe?"

"You know what I mean. I know you do."

"I do, actually, yes."

Yes, yes... you really do!

"And it's what we're both looking for, so come with me."

Go with her?

Of course you want to say yes, because then she might give you the key to her pants, though you're afraid to ask, and which you note she's now wearing around her neck - the key, not her pants. But if that's the only reason, it's not reason enough it is? and the bulk of you is holding back because it's a long way to India, and you'd likely die on the way, die horribly, and though there's something indescribably exciting about Jen, there's a danger about her too, and though it attracts you, you damn well know you're not up to it. And more, your mum's getting on in years and she'd worry and then she'd have no one to take care of her in later life, and suddenly you've a feeling your goddess isn't a goddess at all, but more a sprite running scared of her own ghost, a ghost called post-modernism which, until a moment ago, you'd never even heard of, and you're not even sure exists anyway outside of some wishy washy college syllabus.

Because of course you exist, don't you?

But she's asked you to come, asked you to be with her. Is that not something, Chris? Or is it that in the asking she's become merely mortal for you, and you're not that good with human beings, or truth for that matter. You're in the water now for sure, and you're floundering. She's on the bank reaching out, and all you have

to do is take her hand.

So go on Chris, take it! Why don't you?

Chapter Fifteen

You're on the road to the inn again, except you're not. You've come into the journey a little earlier and you can see the road ahead through the hedgerows. You join it from a path that crosses a meadow, but first the path crosses a river by means of stepping stones. The river's broad and high, a steady rumble to it, deep enough to swim, and there's a hell of a current with trails of silver threads strung out and bubbling in the wake of those ever-so-tempting siren-stones that could just be luring you to your death because you never were much of a swimmer, were you? And that water looks ever so deep, damned cold too...

There must be twenty stones, and the river squeezing through the giddy gaps. And on the opposite bank, where the track picks up to meet the road, there's someone waiting. It's the woman in the blue dress – your mediator, the gatherer of all the bits of your soul you've left strung out in time, and she's holding out her hand as if to take yours, but you're a hundred yards apart and the river between you and you're lacking the courage, or the spirit...

Or something...

The dream lends you the understanding you're to travel to the inn together, that tonight she'll leave the door of her room open into yours so you can be with her all night, if you want. And you want to with all the desperation of what you suspect to be a million chances on which you've already passed, and you're longing not to lack the courage again, because this is make or break.

It's just the river and the stepping stones between you now. But the light's going, like it always is, lending an urgency to the proceedings, and the flow of the river is making your head spin, and you fear to take that first step. And if only you knew which part of your life you were dreaming all of this from, you'd know if it was worth the risk or not.

Oh?

Interesting point there, John. Or is it Chris?

Meaning what?

Meaning it's not as much of a loss if you drown as an old man than when you're young and full of vigour, full of wanting for the pleasure of a woman? And as always in the dreaming you feel about twenty five, or at least you feel indestructible, which puts you at

twenty five or thereabouts, doesn't it?

When was the last time you felt indestructible, Chris?

So, you take that first step, and your legs are already trembling even though the water's no deeper than a puddle just here, so close to the bank. The worst you'll lose if you slip off at this stage is your dignity, so where's all this fear coming from? And then you're thinking, fuck it, if I don't exist anyway, if I'm just an illusion of myself, a collection of memories, then there's nothing to lose, is there? Except in the dreaming of it you can't remember anything. You have no memories, or if you do it's the dream that supplies them, but only as this vague impression of a life lived, and the general mood of it.

So then, if you've no real memory beyond that, then you must exist, mustn't you? so you'd better be careful. And it doesn't matter that a part of you knows you're only dreaming, because this is a big dream and often repeated and full of the puzzle of your life so, though you're not likely to drown, I mean *really* drown – it's still something, and you don't want that to happen, not even symbolically – to drown, I mean – which you suppose means to become finally and hopelessly overwhelmed by your life and your quest for meaning in it. It would be to give in to nihilism, to let the current carry you down-stream to oblivion.

You don't want that, do you John? I mean Chris.

Who the hell is Chris?

Well, make your mind up, dammit. Do you exist, or not? And do you at least trust there's a point to your life, in spite of all evidence to the contrary?

What's that? Speak up! You do?

Then straighten up, eyes front. Go for it!

You begin the crossing in earnest, a little hesitant, trying not to let the direction of flow make you dizzy, then you'll lose your legs. The stones are smooth-worn but not slippery. They mark the passing of countless other souls, and you're ashamed you could ever have doubted. You don't look forward or back, just keep your eyes on the next stone, the next step, take each as it comes, one by one until the crossing is done. Finally, you set down on the other bank and take her hand, thanking God for her patience. Then you look back, thinking to gauge the scale of what you've achieved, but as is the way with dreams, the river's no longer there.

"You made it up," she tells you.

A gentle squeeze of her fingers tells you it doesn't matter, that it's not important you understand this, that you merely accept it, and move on.

"You mean it wasn't really there?"

You're not asking her, because something tells you that, although she has answers a-plenty, it's up to you to work these things out for yourself, that the most she'll do is prevent you from driving yourself insane by persisting in the wrong direction. So you're asking the question of yourself really, and the answer's obvious.

That also means she's been this way herself, and isn't a subliminal part of you, not like other characters in dreams are. Which means the biggest question of all is who is she? And worse, when you're awake and falling in love all over again, is it her you're projecting? Her you're falling in love with? And the only reason you're thinking that is because of this feeling of love when you're with her. It's like going home, like lying down in a soft bed after a hard day and all the ache in your bones dissolves and leaves you feeling made like new again.

But then she has to be a part of you, doesn't she? I mean, how can you project something that isn't there? No wait, she's the Mediator, remember? She brings all the disparate parts of yourself together in the one place, and gets them working in unison, instead of against each other. Hers is the work of a lifetime – your lifetime – and what greater motivator is there than love?

You come up to the inn arm in arm. You're not as incongruous a couple as you might think, realising now your attire is tending backwards in time with waistcoat, moleskin trousers, shirt of Byronic voluminousness and a silken softness. She's your height, feels firm and trustworthy against you, and perfectly in step, but only because you're learning to relax into the step... with her.

The old guy's sitting out with a glass of glowing beer. He checks his watch, doffs his hat to the lady.

"Not a minute too soon," he tells you. And then: "Did you ever stop and think it was the watch and its minute-hand that ushered in modernity? and steam and then all the machinery of war until we reached the point where we began to doubt the truth of our own existence?"

You don't know if that's important or not, nor, if it is, what your part in all of that was, or is, or might yet be, except there's

something reminding you you didn't become a computer programmer like you wanted, I mean, after the factory. You became something else, only you can't remember what, and that bothers you, because you think it might be useful.

Think. You only *think* it might.

So then you turn and you realise after all of that she's gone, melted, de-materialised, like the river. Your sense of loss is enough to wake you. But as you're waking you realise, once again, it's the same old guy, your damned quest for knowledge that prevents you picking up on the bliss of truth, that sometimes if you want to learn, really learn, you've just got to stop looking and start living, that the truth of reality is it's no more complicated than a pebble in your shoe.

But isn't that what you've been doing all your life? Living I mean. And if not then what kind of life is living anyway? Is it always a long road that stretches from here to India with a million escapades along the way, and a constant fear of the knife, and no way to predict the outcome? But what if there's no such place as India for you? What if your road does nothing but meander around this little house not far from where you've been living all your life, and where the only things that change are the times you're living in? Because a lot of people live like that, you know? Are you saying they might as well never have been born? Are you saying the only kind of life to live is one always on the road, and no certainty there'll ever be a tomorrow to wake up to?

Chapter Sixteen

It was dementia that robbed your mother of her self, dementia that had her weeping every five minutes, fresh with grief when you reminded her your dad was already gone, heart attack at forty five, that he wasn't just late home for his tea any more.

You saw them both off in their turn, and in the usual way, with flowers and Sunday best. You played them through the final curtain to their favourite tune, wondering too what tune you'll be played out to yourself, concluding that it doesn't really matter since you'll not be there to hear it, so they can play any damned tune they like – "they" being your wife and kids, you suppose – and they won't know what tune that is because they've never bothered to ask. Sure your whole life is a mystery to them and they can't be bothered finding out, so bound up are they in their own heads, and their phones, your daughters posting their Goth funeral chic on-line, even as you carried your mother in.

Then you return alone to that old house which the solicitor says is yours now, even though it's felt like yours since the day you were born. But it looks different, looks tired suddenly, half a century tired in fact and nothing in it newer than a thirty year old carpet, and a rusty car that hasn't moved since the day your dad died, because you could never convince your mother he didn't need it any more. So there it sat cluttering up the driveway and the neighbours complaining it let the area down as it bubbled up in disgrace and rusted its way back into the earth.

And the neighbours hadn't liked it because they were new and brassy and freshly monied, and your street was becoming gentrified, property prices soaring, though you knew it wouldn't last. You could see the city, its orange rooftops spilling over the hill. In less than half a generation the area would be one more drug-ruined sink-hole, with bags of dog-shit hanging from the gate-posts.

But for the time being it's still a short hop from work, and cheaper than that place you're renting, so maybe you should do like your wife's been saying and move in, spend some money on dragging the place into the twenty first century, and maybe the project will do you good, because you've always been missing something, Chris; and a man needs a burden to carry. You need something real, something true, if that's only photographing every

bothy in the country, or knocking plaster from walls and ordering double glazing.

Never did finish photographing all those bothies, though, did you?

Never really started.

Something true.

A pebble in your shoe.

The Devil in the details.

Jen talked about that, didn't she? a long time ago now. But did it do her any good, you wonder?

So what's the problem with you now then, Chris? Is this nothing but middle aged angst? If it is you've been suffering from it since you were thirty. Otherwise, you're settled in your work – head of faculty now – which would have made your folks proud, if your dad had lived to see it and your mum hadn't been out of her mind. But it doesn't seem to matter to you.

How come whatever you do always seems to miss the point of what you're aiming at? So what is it? Are you wondering if that's how it'll be for you, if, after decades of trying to fix the minds of others, your own mind will simply cave in, or eat itself, and you'll lose all sense of your self, of who you are and who you were and who you might yet be? And how can there be a meaning, a purpose to life since that's the way it so often ends – mid sentence, I mean – for all of us.

The great majority of humankind is already dead.

And you know what?

Nobody cares!

But when the mind has gone, do the dreams make sense? I suppose they do to the dreamer. It's just the frame of reference that alters and you move within it. If only...

No, Chris. There's no sense to be made of this. It's like that sudden hankering you have for a pocket-watch and a waistcoat – except the only time you're supposed to wear waistcoats is at weddings and funerals. But you doubt your daughters are the marrying kind, and the way you're feeling lately the next funeral's going to be your own.

And why is that?

Is it the sheer cloying weight of everyone else's misery hanging off you? It's not the students. They're bright and energetic enough, though even that's sad in a way because you look at yourself and you can see them in the future, if not destroyed, then at least

tempered somewhat by the experience of their lives. It's natural, that the exuberance be tempered at some point by limitation, but need that limitation always be so utterly overwhelming?

Maybe you should be teaching them how to mend themselves instead of others, because God knows they're going to need it. Except you'd need to know how to mend yourself first. And what's the point in travelling this long road if for the whole of it all you're doing is trying to keep yourself going to the end.

Maybe you just need a holiday? Sure, like when you booked that week in the Western Isles, but your wife made you cancel because she prefers a continental hotel with a sun-terrace and a waiter who responds to her every whim. And then there's nothing like a gin and tonic in the afternoon for making her sleepy, so that's why she's up in the room now, zonked out until it's time for dinner. Which, in turn, is why you're here in the hotel garden on your own, thinking back on all of that while looking out across Lake Lucerne to a snow-clad Pilatus, and you're thinking, never in the presence of so much beauty have you ever been so utterly bored, and robbed of your imagination. But it's better than sitting in a stuffy hotel bedroom listening to someone snore.

What you'd like to be doing is stalking the Alps with that old camera, looking for the sublime, like the Romantics used to do, or maybe just looking for Jen, because she's never far from your mind when you're out with the OM 10, and love was always the greatest motivator, wasn't it? Even if it's a lost cause. But this isn't that kind of holiday, so the camera's at home, and the most interesting thing you've done this week is decipher the menu each evening into various offerings of pork, that and glance around the dining room, seeing if you can spot the personality types from their facial tics.

And until you pay your bill at the end of the week, you're God to these people – the staff at least. To everyone else, you're the same old nothing. But pay your bill, and even this bench you're sitting on becomes inaccessible. Why does that mean something to you Chris?

Settle up in the morning, sir, shall we?

Maybe the secret's never to intend checking out, and just keep bluffing your way through the whole of your life like you're in it for ever, and when it's really over, the choice of music is someone else's problem because it's not a tune you'll ever have to listen to.

And then why this feeling of being stalked by love? Jen's gone, Chris. Long gone.

"Cheer up," she says. "Might never happen."

"Eh?"

You're distracted from your stony contemplation of the view by a woman in a blue dress. *Blue dress?* She's sitting at a table nearby, watching you. You're so lost in your reverie you didn't see her arrive. You're sure you've seen her before, or maybe you just think you have. It was somewhere around the hotel or the town, or maybe you just dreamed her, I mean recently, and since you're not a strict materialist any more, it's okay for you to dream of things ahead of them actually happening. And since also, in a way, you feel you already know her, you crack a smile, a little playful. And you fall in love.

"What if it already has?"

"Oh, dear," she says. "Then I wouldn't like to be in your shoes."

"Only kidding. Things aren't so bad as that."

Except then you're thinking both your parents are dead, and it's your generation next, and you're married to a woman who barely tolerates you any more, you've not had sex in years, and both your kids think you're a joke, yet you're the only one actually shouldering the world at all, so they can play and pose on social media, and pretend they've got it all under control when even the faintest whiff of reality has them running for the cover of their bedrooms where they can sad-fish for ever... so maybe it already has... actually... you know... happened, I mean.

You hasten to explain. "When I relax, my face just settles of its own accord into a frown. It doesn't mean I'm as miserable as I look."

"That's okay then. For a moment I thought I was going to have to step in and cheer you up."

"Well, you're welcome to try anyway. What would you suggest?"

"How about coffee?"

"Always does the trick for me."

"Me too."

She reminds you of Jen, this woman: strong, independent, confident, shoulders back, a bold, direct poise to her. She's unflinching, but more self assured, not as desperately brave as you remember Jen was. She's definitely an eight on the Enneagram. A challenger, a protector, tending towards the Giver, unlike you – very much a five, as Jen observed: an observer of life, an over-thinker, and still regressive, tending towards non-commitment, isolation and misanthropy. In other words she's the best of herself,

while you're the worst, so take care, or she'll run rings around you. Still... a five, under the right conditions tends to move towards an eight, so maybe that's why you find her so attractive, Jen too. You want to be like her.

Ah... minor revelation, Chris!

"You're staying here?" you ask.

She gives a nod, invites you to sit, calls over an eager waiter, orders coffee.

"Great view, isn't it?" she says.

"Stunning."

So then you're wondering about the wisdom of sitting down with a strange and apparently single woman, I mean while your wife's sleeping off her gin and tonic upstairs. But it's just coffee and she's charming and beautiful, and she grants you the opportunity of behaving like a gentleman, or in any case like a man, and you've not felt like one of those for a long time.

"We've met," she says.

"Oh?"

You feel something then, a shifting of the veil, and you know you've dreamed of her, or maybe it was just the dress, *a woman in a blue dress*. But how would she know that?

"Vienna last year," she reminds you.

Ah! So now you're thinking: Vienna, that interminably long conference on Freud and Adler!

"I remember. We shared a table at the conference dinner. You were with, Igor Kadinsky."

Okay, so far so good. You see her in a blue dress, a different one, a little old fashioned. But then Kadinsky's also dressed a little old fashioned in a white suit and Fedora hat. Kadinsky: feted genius, narcissist and insufferable bore...

"You're... Sophia!"

"Yes, and you're?... wait... it's Chris isn't it? Chris Marshall."

She knows your name? Why does that move you so? To be known, to be recognised? Well... does it not reassure you that you exist somewhere other than the insides of your own head?

Well, possibly, but only if you're not dreaming her as well.

So then you're talking shop. She has a practise in Prague. And no, she's no longer with Kadinsky, not that she ever was. Not really. He just liked everyone to think she was. Kadinsky with his white suit and his little pointy beard, like an old-world Russian emigre.

But he and Sophia were the celebrities of the circuit then, still are for all you know.

You? You've worked for a slowly collapsing state institution, and now for a provincial college no one's ever heard of, and student numbers are dwindling as the western educational system is laid bare in all its post-modern absurdity. It's dawning on you private practice is to be your salvation, that like Jen said, all those years ago: *always plenty of rich loonies in need of therapy*.

As for the poor, there's no redeeming them this side of the apocalypse.

Sophia Klein!

You recall she presented on a strange theory of dreams that was definitely not Freudian. You forget the precise details now but it had struck you at the time as being more from the new age, and the spiritual side of things, than from the harder strata of experimental psychology. The speculative stuff was fine, it was alluring and all, but if you were treating someone for a phobia, you preferred to work on the basis of something more reliable. And most people at her level of the psychoanalytical community were patently insane themselves. Also you're just a counsellor, Chris, your brain like a snail compared with their swiftness. But swiftness does not always equate to truth. No point being swift if all you're doing is running around in circles, for then even a snail, travelling in a sufficiently straight line, has the better trajectory, does it not?

But wait. Now you realise you're no longer talking shop. She's charming you, deliberately, flattering you, coming at you with those big, belladonna eyes and fluttering lashes, all of this swelling your breast, puffing you up. She's... flirting with you, dammit, and when coffee's done she rises, departs with a half smile, though somewhat sudden, and you're wondering if you've offended her by some unconscious gaffe, until you realise she's left her room key on the table.

On purpose.

A key, Chris! You know?

Now that's interesting. You feel sure something of this nature has happened before, but you can't remember where... or when.

So...

Option one: you deliver that key to reception, tell them the lady in room twenty six has forgotten it. Or, option two, you take it up to her yourself, since she will obviously be standing outside the

door, waiting for you. Sophia Klein, leading analyst, former mistress to the alleged genius Kadinsky, maker and breaker of psychoanalytic princes. You don't get to enter that sphere of influence every day do you? So don't think of it as philandering, Chris, so much as a good career move.

Twenty Six. Her room number! Two plus six equals eight – the Enneagram again: The Challenger, the Protector. Yes, she's challenging you, Chris. Or maybe it's just the moment that's challenging you. You're lonely, frustrated, you need rich clients for your practice, and, all right, a good shag to boot, so get off your arse and do something about it, man!

Okay, one problem with that, however: you're not a philanderer. In twenty years you've remained loyal to your own somewhat scornful lady, and your own scornful and narcissistic little princesses. But it cannot be said you don't find pleasure in the novelty of a woman who obviously wants you, casually, and in the heat of the moment, to be enjoyed in the moment, and perhaps in accepting such danger, you're in some way accepting that invitation all over again, to join a fearless girl on the road to India. But who's to say this woman is any more a goddess than all the others, who were not.

You take up the key, run through the options in your head again.

You're longing for love, yes, but not *that* kind of love.

Still any port in a storm, eh?

Chapter Seventeen

The church clock is striking. You count seven, steady yourself. You're at the Inn at the Edge of Light, in an unfamiliar room, not yours. Next door maybe. You have the key in your hand. The woman in the blue dress is just stepping out of that dress, and laying it over the back of a chair. Her contemporary lilac underwear puzzles you. But you can't bring to mind the shape of Victorian foundation garments, though for some odd reason you're sure you're intimately familiar with them, so you suppose the dream is instead denying you those particular details, improvising instead from the bric-a-brac of memory, and as such a bra and pants will suffice, at least insofar as what it symbolises here. And what it symbolises, you suppose, is both the goal of completion and the somewhat flimsy barriers to it.

That barrier is now removed without ceremony, swept away, see-sawed down, and you are presented with a woman whose body is a symbol of potency beyond what is surely normal. You feel at once a deep stirring and, since you've only just become aware of your situation here – dare we say even lucid – you want to keep going as long as you can, and where you seem to be going right now, any second in fact, is sex!

But sex in dreams always wakes you up, and you don't want to wake up just yet. And yes, sex is definitely the thing here, but also, unlike in life when it can always be avoided, the dream brings this situation symbolically to the fore, and makes you a slave to it. The way is open, the end inevitable.

"What part of me are you?"

"No questions," she says.

But you already know, Chris. She's the Mediator, the Facilitator, the bringer together of all the various things you are or were or might one day be. And she's ready for you, coming for you, coming *at* you, so you look behind as if to run, but the door has gone. There's just you and her, sealed in this chamber of all your past loves. She holds herself against you, looks into your eyes, holds you there, frozen, challenges you to take your hands, which you are hiding safe behind your back, and place your palms instead flat upon the heat of her hips.

Take possession, and accept what's coming, she's saying – though

without actually saying it. But you know if you do that, you'll be set, and worse you'll be awake, and nothing in your life can ever be so good as this. But *this* is not the thing is it? This is merely the symbol of capitulation, the symbol of closing with what you say you want, even though you fear it.

So you beg her: "Slower please."

"Remember this isn't about the journey," she tells you. "Nor is the destination as important as you think. It's what lies beyond."

And since this is a dream, magic is permitted, so she uses it to render you unclothed and aching, and rising against her, and without moving from her embrace, without even blinking, she opens to receive you deep into the sweet otherness of her being, confirming what you've known all along but paradoxically refused all your life to take for granted:

That you exist, Chris.

That you *definitely* exist.

It's with dream-magic too she draws out of you that thing you would like to hold on to, a lifetime of continence, or at least slow it down, or draw it out, all the more to control it, to avoid the full burning, over-brimming force of it. But already she has it from you, and she has only to smile her pleasure and you are lost in the whiteness of your own mind, a mind scrubbed clean and rendered inside out.

So then you're waking against cool goose-down, to a gentle breeze inflating the curtain. The sense you have of the dream now is one of post-coital bliss, though you no longer remember the details of it beyond that embrace. You hear birdsong, and the shower running. It stops and from the en-suite a girl emerges, towelling her hair dry. She wears shorts and a clingy vest, and she's smiling.

"Are you coming then?" she says.

"Hmm? All the way to India, perhaps?" Though why you should say that, you've no idea, only that it chimes with something else, far, far away, as you say it.

"Don't be daft," she says. "I was only thinking we could go down the road a bit."

"It's morning now?"

"Yes." She tugs back the curtain, and the light streams in, lights up the room with its fresh-start cleanness. "Look at that," she says, then playfully tosses her towel at you. It's damp from her body, and

sex-scented, though you know you are most likely imagining the latter.

"I'm hungry," she says. "Breakfast is in five."

You realise of course you've crossed the threshold into tomorrow now, spent the night at the Inn at the Edge of Light, slept and woken up, still in the dream, and this is going to cost you because it's all on the tab, and the Landlord's downstairs, frying your bacon.

She notes your hesitation. "Aren't you hungry?" she asks.

You're not, but you're afraid to disappoint her by saying so. "Sure, but wait. Tell, me first, what part of me are you?"

She sparkles. "Ah! Good question. About time you asked me that. I'm the road not taken, obviously. Now you tell me: what part of me are you?"

Well, go on, answer that one? Because in answering it, you'll learn something about your self, John, or is it Chris? But for you to be a part of her in this dream, she has to be the one dreaming it, and that's fine because it means the tab's on her.

You are caution, and reticence. You are the world as lived inside your head – or her head. You are a face turned from the wind while hers is not. Indeed you are her mirror image. What she strives for with all her spirit, yours is the voice holding her back. You are the limit that gives her life meaning. And though you've said none of this, only pondered it a while, she gives a nod.

"Maybe all of that's true," she says. "But there's no need to be so negative about it. You're also the time taken to look ahead, to see the snake lying curled up there beneath your foot, before you step on it. And it's as well because that's a poisonous snake, and it'll kill you."

"But, what if there are no snakes? What if you spend your whole life fearing snakes, and there aren't any."

She looks sad now. "There are snakes everywhere, John. Trick is to ignore them, pretend they're not there. And if they bite, they bite. And if you die in the dust of a foreign land while searching for Arcadia, well so what? "

"Then why bother being careful of snakes? Why not simply trust to fate?"

"Ah, why not indeed? Good point. I think you've got me there."

You have an inkling now of who she might be, someone you met once, or have yet to meet, but you hesitate to test for it, in case you're right.

If you die you die? Well maybe it's already happened, and you're dreaming from some other time outside of your own life, all of which the dream assures you is perfectly feasible. But then the dream is your only frame of reference here and though you have no choice in your trusting of it, it doesn't make it wholly true, does it? And maybe it wasn't a snakebite; maybe you both died at the hands of some crazed fanatic who valued God above life – well your life anyway. Or maybe it was only she who perished for want of attention, that if only you'd followed her you might have held her back just enough for her to escape that particular fate.

Chapter Eighteen

So, they're gone now, are they? Wife, kids... all flown and bent on getting pregnant – the kids, not your wife. Next thing you know you'll be a granddad, always assuming they'll let you know. As for that time in Lucerne, maybe you should have... well, gone for it, as they say, instead of dropping the key back at reception like a dork. Except it wouldn't have made you feel any better would it? How many clients have you had who thought they could get away with it, that it would change their lives. And did it? No. It just covered over a bad situation, disguised the knot of their lives, a knot they couldn't untangle, nor see the only solution was to cut it off, open the box on fresh possibilities. She was a looker though, eh? Hell, just talking with her that afternoon made you feel better than you've ever done.

Except for that time with Jen.

Still thinking about her, Chris? But that was half your life ago.

You're in the city now, looking for the place that used to be your studio. You're trying to find the streets you knew when you were with Charlie, but they've all changed. Everything's made of glass now and it reflects everything else, and makes you dizzy. You were thinking maybe you might bump into her and raise a spark of longing, except she'll be in her sixties now and things tend not to stay where you drop them any more. Meanwhile the machine is reading your face and your phone is buzzing with personalised adverts, relevant to your locale, though you note the older you get the less alluring they've become, those adverts: equity release and funeral parlours are about all you're worth to a society now intent on grabbing the accrued assets of your life before you go.

But would things have been any different if you'd gone with Jen? She was not the keeping type, was she? You might have shared a summer perhaps, then gone your separate ways, her footloose to some other daring spot and you buckling down out of guilt and self loathing to your log-tables or some other form of earnest study.

Always trying to make something tangible of yourself, Chris?

Well, now here you are, Doc. Head of department and your own (mostly virtual) private practice, wise counsellor to a handful of the one percent, while still trapped in grunge yourself and dreaming of the wide open spaces where your camera can see more than you

and tell you what you're missing. Except you don't get very far these days and your photographs are all looking same, and the camera's seeing only what it saw before, which is nothing.

There's a bunch of Brown-Shirts up ahead, getting bolder these days, strutting with arrogance, black arm-bands, symbols of the greatest horrors unleashed on ourselves, and a growing confidence in threatening all of that on us again. Confidence or stupidity? That kind of confidence, Chris? same thing. They have the empty expressions of killers. People of bad character seeping into the cracks of governance. Local elections coming up. And the worst thing? Someone will vote for them, believing them to be the solution to a problem we have in large part created ourselves by our apathy.

A media-drone dips down in front of you like a pesky hover-fly. You hate it when they do that. It offers a leaflet: vote for the Sisters of Saint George! Feminism and Nationalism but of a different flavour to the godless Brown-Shirts. History repeats itself in the absence of anything more progressive. Have you noticed? But more to the point, what have you been clicking recently to make it think you'd be thus inclined? Anyway, you evade it, it persists, docks your citizen score a few points for reluctance, you duck into a coffee shop and it narrowly avoids banging up against the glass – a few more points deducted no doubt for aggressive tendencies. It doesn't matter, your score's zero anyway, but since you've no debt and don't require credit you're somewhat insulated from the games other people are obliged to play.

Parasite!

The Sisters of Saint George? You've observed how older males, regardless of their own political persuasion, are more likely to vote for archetypal women. Even Thatcher was muse to many a wet dreaming Beta-man. And always now the promise of an ideological Arcadia to correct the mess we're living in. Would Hitler or Stalin have succeeded in world domination, had they been women?

Arcadia? Familiar word.

Hell, sometimes these days it feels like you're walking through a sci-fi dystopia, but since it was all coming anyway, what choice did you have? Do you think you could have stopped the clock back in '87? Made that summer last for ever in your sweet little bothy... with Jen?

No, but a few more days at least would have been very pleasant

indeed.

"Afternoon, Christopher."

Ah, Ted – colleague on the staff, nearly eighty now, and still working, twice as wise as you and should have got department head, but he didn't want it, set you up for it instead so you'd wise up, he said, and leave, go and do something else with your life. But this is the something else. How many something else's can a man have, other than the one he wants, the one he can't define yet and which manages to haunt him all his days?

There he is in his tweeds, your archetypal wise old man – the English version at least – among all this teeshirted and face-tattoed, coffee-shop youth. And in an age when no one wears even a wrist-watch any more he's there drawing his nineteenth-century English Lever from his waistcoat pocket, as if to time your sitting down. Then he sets it on the table with precision and ceremony.

"What time do you make it?" he asks.

"Eh... oh." You take out your Omega GSTP, set it down beside his lumbering great silver piece. Both watches read ten past two. The fingers are like a bird's wings in flight. But where would we migrate to? There's nowhere left that's safe, or clean, or meaningful any more.

"Is that the real time, do you think?" he asks. "Or are we both wrong?"

Most conversations with Ted, start like this. "I don't know, Ted. It's not like there's much of a difference is there, because then we could take the average. I can check my phone if you like."

"What makes you think that'll be right?"

"Gets its time from the atomic clock, which is set to the turn of the galaxy. Can't be more right than that, can it?"

He grunts, concedes defeat begrudgingly, though you can tell a part of him is still uncertain, that for him the business of time is more accurately determined by a process that has its genesis on a different plane altogether, that indeed our adherence to the certainty of our own time, or times, our own frame of reference, is the root cause of our malaise. And our malaise, according to Ted, is an endemic madness for which we are both agreed there is no cure now beyond the spilling of vast quantities of blood, and until we are horrified by that carnage and hammer the cork back in the bottle by whatever means, we are destined to suffer it.

The cork, Chris?

"So," he asks. "Skiving from the office then?"

"I suppose you'd call it that. I was looking for someone. A girl. Last saw her in the nineties. When I was a student."

"Ah. Peculiar times, the nineties."

"All times are peculiar, Ted. Depends how you look at them."

"True. Tell me, you still building up your private practice?"

"As best I can, yes. Why, do you need help?"

He laughs at that. "My neuroses are manifold and self evident," he says. "But I am at peace with them. No... just wondered."

"Wondered?"

"If... from your perspective, and from your conversations with clients, there's an end-date in sight yet."

"An end-date?"

"That at some point every one of us will have lost our minds, and who will run the departments then?"

"Ah! If you ask me, the nutters are already in charge. But I wouldn't worry. I know what you mean and we've another twenty years maybe, but by then the machines will have taken over, and we'll believe every damned thing they tell us."

"True, and I know they'll be very competent, but will they value life?"

"I think you know the answer to that. We'll just be consumers to them, so long as we're spending. And if we're not, we'll be a waste of space."

"Yes... and there'll be no old things any more. Indeed it wouldn't surprise me if we were compelled by law to renew our every possession at least once every few years."

"No, we'll be denied possessions. Everything, even the clothes on our backs will be leased. Nothing will grow old, and all things will be endlessly renewed until we grind the planet to dust and burn it to a crisp in pursuit of the last dollar of profit."

"And what does it profit if we gain the world but lose our souls? Ha! But speaking of growing old, I'd like you to have my watch when I'm gone."

"What? That old thing. It was obsolete when it was new, like two hundred years ago."

"But of course, that's why I like it. Plus it's still going, and some of us value the old ways of doing things. The old ways of seeing... time I mean. Did you know most of the kids in here couldn't tell the time with an old fashioned watch like this any more. That's how

obsolete we both are, Chris. The hours we spent in dusty classrooms simply learning how to tell the time..."

"Well, learning how to see it in a certain way – kind of circular I suppose. And you can't blame the kids for having no interest in a thing that's of no use to them. Or maybe we're ahead of our time, actually, Ted. Did you ever think that? This sense of our decrepitude, our obsolescence as we age, it could be delusional. Perhaps we're infected with the same mind-plague as everyone else. This thing that's eating our brains. Maybe we should stick to our guns when we say things were better in the old days. I mean... maybe they really were."

"Ah, the olden times! Of course! I calculate the golden era to be always equivalent to the average of our being in time. And that's always half our age. Beyond that every generation has its own needs and must reinvent itself."

"But it's harder to find our purpose now, Ted."

"You think? Did we ever find it in the past? Look out of the window, Chris. Perhaps it's easier to see what's right, when it's also easier to see what's patently wrong. And speaking of guns, yours was made for war, of course. Your watch I mean. Mine was made so as to shine brightly, and not be late for Church."

"War?"

"That broad arrow on the back of your watch tells me it spent its most active years in a serviceman's pocket, around the middle of the twentieth century, in the fight against Fascism. Then half a century at rest in a drawer while Fascism sulked, then slipped in again by the back door. Have you seen the Brown Shirts strutting their stuff this afternoon? We expect the major evils to come clumping up the high-street like a colossus, breathing fire. But actually Evil, with a capital 'E' is more cunning than that. It hides in all of us, sapping our will to do right in the face of all those little day to day wrongs, it hides in the details, Chris."

"How much coffee have you had?"

"Never mind that. What do your dreams tell you?"

"You know how I feel about dreams. I never bother them. They have their own life to lead, without us muddling about in them, dragging our anxieties in after us."

"Mine tell me the same thing. The dream-life is best lived and left alone. And the Enneagram? You still teach that?"

"Sure, though it's being outpaced by Bead-Game theory. I don't

know, Ted. It all seems unnecessarily complicated these days, like one guru just building a reputation on the back of another, and our interpretations depend on which guru's in vogue at any given time."

"Ah, you mean like Kadinsky?"

"Sure, like him. Sage or charlatan, Ted? You must have known a few in your time."

"Does it matter. Chris? We are professional listeners. It does people good to be listened to, and perhaps that's the sum of it. No more. No less."

"So the rest is bullshit?"

He nods, certain of it. "Oh yes. Dreams are vitally important of course, but only to the person dreaming them, and no one else can help with those. Speaking of which, did you ever dream of an old Inn set down amid the Yorkshire moors? I mean in the days before we had to pay to go there."

You shrug, not sure. You might have done. It rings a bell but the details are blurry.

"I do," he says. "I dream about it a lot these days – at least I think I do, or it may be the dream that's telling me I do. Funny things, dreams. I keep bumping into a young chap there. Could be you, actually."

"Not if he's a young chap."

"We were all young once, Chris. And time is a flexible concept in the dreaming. He's looking for something, this chap."

"So... what might I be to you in your dream then?"

"Hope, I think."

"Then you've definitely got the wrong guy."

"No, I'm in the winter of my years. If I'm going to find out what it was all for, it won't be this side of the veil and, like my neuroses, I'm at peace with that. But you still have a chance, Chris. Your presence in my dreams tells me the quest is not in vain, that the singularity is not inevitable."

"Oh, come on, Ted. People are talking about the singularity like it's something new. But they've been talking about it for thousands of years. It was supposed to happen in 2012, remember? Never did though. Now the hippies are quiet about it."

Two plus nought, plus one plus two, equals five. It would never happen on a five anyway, would it?

The singularity. Characterised by total economic collapse and endemic insanity.

At least according to Kadinsky.

"Oh, it'll happen." says Ted. "For sure it will. What did we expect anyway at midnight 2012? Something written in the sky? Ask me though, that's when it began."

"When what began?"

"Change. Nothing dramatic. But an acceleration towards oblivion all the same."

"All right, change is coming, I feel that too, and it won't be good – well, it's never any better is it? It'll be like the Gulag, but global. The only way to sustain economic growth now is through mass slavery. We've discussed this before, Ted. There's no solution, no way out. And the West will burn because the rich have set fire to it, moved their money east."

"Or perhaps we're being unduly pessimistic."

"I don't think so. I was out over the moors at the weekend - not Yorkshire - the West Pennines are still free. I sat down on the scarp edge of Winter Hill. The moors were shaded with vast runs of white cotton grass and the swallows were riding the breeze. It was a revelation, you know? This time of year it's usually on fire. And below me, and all around me, six million people hadn't a clue, and even if they'd seen it, they wouldn't have felt it, and they'd just have left a pile of trash behind: bags of dog turds, and those little metal cylinders they use to get themselves briefly high. And maybe they deserve no better. And maybe I don't either – this loneliness, I mean – that I look out through the pentaprism of that old camera and feel I have to shoulder the burden of beauty on my own."

Ted's nodding, smiling as you witter on. It's what he's good at, bursting the dam of your reserve, getting you to spill your thoughts. The mark of a master therapist.

"Still shooting black and white?"

"Yes. I found a guy who still processes it, scans it to digital for me."

"Easier if you traded that antique for a digital camera – I mean even digital's becoming antique now with all this real-vue stuff."

"Not the same though. Too... instant. We need a framework, a limitation, otherwise nothing means anything any more. Even God worked that one out, which is why he became a man. People think they understand cameras, and they might do, but they know nothing about photography. They know nothing about monochrome. I once spent a while faking saucy French postcards,

saw a lot of girls undressed, but believe me that camera saw a lot more than I did. Shooting grainy black and white, it saw into their souls. Still haunts me."

Ted mulls this revelation over a while, and then he says: "You know you've always talked as if you're a man who took a wrong path a long time ago and regretted it ever since. But we can all say the same. We can all look back and say if only I'd done that, or not done that. And I've been thinking you should get married again. Saucy French postcards are one thing, but a man needs a woman."

"No, he doesn't. Or at least I've come to believe of late, women are convinced they don't need men, and I'm okay with that. Women are just human beings like everyone else. What a man needs is to worship his goddess and do her bidding. And yes, I met one once, but I let her go. And maybe that was the best I could do, to deify her that way... that if I'd hung onto her, or followed her like she wanted..."

There's a scuffle on the street. Someone's thrown a tin of white paint at the Brown-Shirts, scored a direct hit. They retaliate with fisticuffs and boots. A group of students burst into the coffee shop for refuge. One is bleeding from the nose. There are screams.

Sure what's the point of all the longing, Chris,...

...if this was coming anyway?

Chapter Nineteen

The Inn is quiet tonight, just you and the landlord, so you sit at the bar while you continue to ponder the question, though you can't remember where that question comes from now, nor how long you've been carrying it around.

Remind me again, what question's that?

If it was all coming anyway, the future, I mean, and if not exactly *your* future then at least the future of this world you were bound to live in, what difference does it make if you took a decision in your past you've always felt was unhelpful to your sense of being?

And does it matter how the world turns out anyway if you've felt your whole life you missed the boat a lifetime ago? Does it matter what shore you wash up on if there's no chance of ever going back and redeeming yourself? And in so longing for the impossible, are you not missing out on something more vital, like how if you've always felt somewhat out of the world, somewhat disconnected, is that the fault of the world, which is perfectly happy to go on without you...

Or is it yours?

By now you're convinced that whether you're asleep or dead, this half-life of the Inn at the Edge of Light goes on, and you with it, that this is your first stop in the journey through your own personal underworld. And what subliminal impressions of the top-side world you bring in here colours your dreaming as much as your dreaming colours what you wake up with out there. And anyway, last time, didn't you manage to sleep through until morning? Yet here you are remembering nothing of that day you spent in the dreaming, a day on the road with this girl you sort of know-but-don't-quite-know. Or maybe you knew her once, or you've yet to know her properly. And as for the road, doesn't a man learn more about himself in a single day simply moving from here to there, and regardless of origin and destination, than he learns in a whole lifetime just sitting on his arse? And isn't that what you've been doing John, I mean Chris? Sitting on your arse while imagining a way back to the road?

Heavens you seem muddled tonight. Have you been drinking?

You'll surely not be dreaming this for long. You'll be waking in the small hours as usual, with a profound sense of your own failure,

a splitting head and wanting to pee.

The landlord is pouring you out another glass of Old Fettlecairn. It empties the bottle, which he now sets upright by your glass. You're worried it's symbolic – you know? Last glass and all that. But he reads your thoughts and points to a fresh bottle on the rack behind him. Plenty still to go at, he's saying. So you take heart, take up the empty bottle, sniff that glorious scent, then lower your lips to the neck and blow, thinking to summon up your djinn and, in asking of it an answer to your dilemma, use up your first wish, because you've been summoning this spirit all your life and never yet made a single coherent wish. And isn't that what you're supposed to do with djinns? But it's a queer djinn this that seems to come and go as it pleases. It doesn't need you to free it, so maybe it's been free all along and it's you that's been locked up in that bottle instead. Anyway, your djinn must be busy tonight because it's still just you and the landlord.

So you turn to him now and you thank him for his hospitality, and then you ask him what part of you he is. And he shrugs, says he's just the keeper of the inn and not to worry about things like that so far as he's concerned. He pours the drinks, hands out keys to all the rooms. As he speaks he slides your key over while something in his expression seems to be inviting another question, and maybe he planted that question there, or maybe it's the question you've been meaning to ask all along, but were afraid to.

What part of you does the key represent?

Because it's not just a McGuffin, John. And maybe you're thinking he's going to tell you it's something locked up, like you in that bottle, or something you're suppressing, and your desire to get at it – something phallic and Freudian like that, but no: he says it's just the key to the room you'll wake up in tomorrow morning, which seems an obvious thing to say. But he goes on to explain how not everyone finds their way to the Inn at the Edge of Light, and even those who do, those with a long-standing reservation, like you, don't always know what to do with that damned key when they get here.

"And why is that?"

"Afraid to ask, perhaps," he tells you. "Or too polite. But no harm in it. Everyone comes along at their own pace. You all work it out eventually, and everyone gets there in the end."

So, you're wondering about that as you take up your key, noting

for the first time the number on the tag: fifty-eight. That seems a lot of rooms for what on the outside looks like such a small, country inn. Ten would be pushing it. Perhaps it extends a long way back then. Has your room always been fifty-eight? You can't remember, but since you always get the same room, it has to have been fifty-eight, always, hasn't it?

How can the number change and still be the same room?

"Do guests always get the same room?" you ask him. You wonder too why you never thought to ask this before. Too afraid? Too polite?

"Most prefer the same room," he says. "Like second nature. Never think to ask otherwise. But others do like a change now and then."

Then you tell him you've something you need to get off your chest, that you never wake up here in the morning, that by now you must owe him a fortune, and you feel terribly guilty about that, but he waves away your concerns, pats a large red book on the counter, tells you once more it's all on the tab. It's a thick book, held with a clasp, like a journal of your life, or an accounting of it, perhaps in terms of emotional rather than financial credits and debits, and you'd love a peek at that except his hand is on it, firmly, as a warning that it would be unwise to pry and anyway, remember, it's dangerous to come in here thinking you have a clue who you are in the first place, because it most likely isn't true and the actual truth of your self could knock you clean off course.

But am I in profit? in balance? or am I running a deficit?

Sure, there it is on the bar at the Inn at the Edge of Light, that fine, red book, and it contains the true story of your life. Not stories *based* on true events, nor merely *inspired* by them, but the actual, unexpurgated truth!

"The many stories, actually," he says, though you don't understand what he means by that, because surely a life can only have one story, from beginning to end.

"I did wake up here once," you tell him.

He searches his memory, agrees that you did but, as he recalls, on that occasion you slipped through at the invite of another guest and she settled the bill on your behalf, that normally a person would not wake up here in the morning, unless it was already late when they'd arrived the night before, and they'd got their key after he'd rung Last Orders on them.

"Last Orders?"

He affirms, "Last Orders, sir."

"You still ring Last Orders? Used to be half past ten in the old days, as I recall. Now things seems to go on all night."

"True, but we're a little old fashioned in our ways here. And sometimes the old ways were built on a wisdom that's been lost in all this clamour of modernity. We tend to lose ourselves without boundaries, sir. Don't you think? Which is why I prefer to keep last orders myself."

All of this is symbolic, remember? everything you've just said, everything he's just told you. But within the symbolism is a truth greater than any you've perceived before, and its about your life, and time, and the forking of your path, every time you make a decision to go this way or that, to do this thing or that. And if it wasn't normal to wake up here in the morning, then where? And if you got the same room every time you came here, but woke back to the next day of the same old life, what if, instead, you asked...

His eyes light up at the idea: "You'd like to try another room, sir?"

You have your finger on the key he's just given you and all of it's so clear now, but only because the dream is giving you that impression of a sudden, like all those other impressions, that you've been this way before, and you'll believe anything the dream tells you since that's the very nature of them. It's the same room, but the number changes. The same story of your life. You fall asleep, you wake back into the same story. All that changes is you, in time, one day ahead of where you laid your head.

The room number is your age.

So... think, Chris, think...

To choose another room, is to wake into a different story, a story that commences from a different part of your life, and with a different decision on the path you took before. That's clear. But there may be other things you're unaware of and, like a djinn's wishes in all those old cautionary stories, there may be unforeseen consequences. And is that not the age old lesson of wishing against things as they are?

There comes a voice from behind you: "He'll take the same room."

It's the girl – shorts and a vest top, wild hair all the way down her back and a weighty pack she's just lowering to the ground.

Your djinn.

"I thought we were going on a walk together," she says.

"So did I. You mean we didn't? I'm sorry, I would have loved that. But I'm never sure what came before or after any of my visits here. I surely wanted to. I remember you as my path not taken. And I suspect it's a major theme of my life up-top, so to speak, that I didn't take a certain path, and I really wish I could go back and take it now – whenever 'now' is. And I think I've just worked it out, actually, that I need only ask for a different room."

"Well that may be so. Let's say it's true. But are you sure you'd want to do that?"

"You mean, would it be wise? Hell, I don't know. But yes I'd like to explore the possibilities. Who wouldn't?"

You take up your key, seal your fist around it. "This is the key to the room that leads back to my life as it was. If I ask for another room, I wake up somewhere in a different part of my life. And then I'll get an inkling you see? When I'm about to make a choice I made before but which turned out badly for me, I'll just know it and make another choice, do the thing I should have done, but didn't... I mean before."

There's a twinkle in the landlord's eye, and you can tell you're getting warmer. You check your room number again. Fifty-eight. Are you already that old? Pick a smaller number, go way back in time, wake up to an earlier part of your life, change course if you want. Keep doing it. Be for ever young.

"What if I asked for room twenty-six?"

Oh? Why twenty-six?

Because is that not where you went wrong? And though you can't remember exactly, surely if you went back, you'd recognise it for what it was, that catastrophic error, and you'd choose another way, follow that story through to another conclusion.

"That would be a serious wish," she tells you.

"But can you grant it?"

"Speaking as your djinn, no way would I ever grant that one. But he will. He's in charge here. All I can do is caution you against it. You know how tricky wishes can be, always those unforeseen consequences that ruin your best intentions."

"Oh?"

"Look at me, John. Tell me what you see?"

"Adventurous spirit, travel, excitement, energy... we've already done this."

"What if I told you all I really wanted was to settle down, find a good man, have kids and never venture further than the gatepost?"

"You? No way!"

"Oh? You think not? You think I still want to sleep in a mouldy old tent, and pee in the bushes when I'm in my forties?"

"But it's all finished, we said." *Did we say that? But what's finished, John? What are you talking about?* "The signs were there back then... or something. That's what we said..."

Back when?

"And believe me I've a feeling it's a hell of a lot worse out there now. I mean the world's no place for an ordinary life any more, not the way we used to define it. Better on the road, away from everything and everyone. Better meditating on a beach alone, because we sure as hell can't marry and raise kids like we once could, and even if we did we'd just be raising them into madness."

But it's no good, getting all het up this way. It always opens a gate and lets the Ego come clumping back in with its muddy boots, and the next thing you know you're waking up because your ego's an arrogant bastard and none of this can mean anything because none of it is real. And thank God it isn't because while the landlord talks on the one hand of the virtue of strict boundaries in life, at the same time he's offering you a life that might be lived...

Entirely without them.

Chapter Twenty

Odd, the things we think about isn't it? Here you are, sitting at your drawing board, having just inked in a line, and you're waiting for it to dry because it's summer and humidity in the office is sky-high. And what you're mainly thinking about right now is Sara Rainsford who walked by ten minutes ago, and you can't get the image of her peachy bum in those spray-on Levis out of your head, and how you'd gladly die in exchange for just half an hour in the stationery cupboard with her, and her willing of course. But you'll never know because you'll never ask. And since you've not been with a girl yet, you're wondering what it's like, if you'd even know what to do or if it comes naturally and if the actual act of it is anywhere near as mind-blowing as its sheer promise, at least from this angle, because what kind of God in his heaven would create such a divine shape as *that* and then deny you access to it?

The ink's drying ever so slowly today and it's going to take you the whole day just to finish up this one view, let alone the whole drawing and then detail the damned thing. But you can't rush it or you'll end up smudging the corners and old Smollet, the section leader, well... though he can't draw for toffee himself – which is why he's the section leader – he's a bit of a martinet about things like that, so it'll likely take the whole week to design what amounts to nothing more than a fucking spanner, and submit the drawing for approval.

Then you've only got another forty years of this to go, and somewhere between, get a girl and a house and better car, and kids to raise as slaves to drawing boards like these. And between those times, and these times you'll be catching surreptitious glances at your newspaper, and swapping camera-talk with Bernie Leadbetter who sold you that OM10 last year and which you've yet to get the hang of, though not for want of trying. Sure, old Bernie with his tweeds and his pipe, and looking squat as an onion on his stool, he taught you most of what you know of life, and keeps pointing you in the direction of your quest for the rest of what it is you think you want to know.

But what neither of you have worked out is that if the miners are finished, like the papers have been saying, it means the mines are finished too, and since what the firm of Dowton and Company

makes is mining equipment, you could be out of a job this time next year. You might be better thinking about that instead of Sara Rainsford's bum, but you're a little young for second guessing such long-term geopolitics.

No, here we go again, your fantasy moving on to cool sheets in some sexy hotel, and the scent of Sara's skin, and what it would be like to have her play a little fellatio on your whistle, since rumour has it she's awfully good at that. But is she the sort of girl you could take home to meet your mother? Would she even want to meet your mother? Girls who play a virtuoso fellatio tend to avoid little boys' mothers, because mothers have a sixth sense about those things and they'd rather a girl was the kind to buckle down and look after a mother's son properly, and in departments other than the bedroom.

So grow up Chris!

She'd never look twice at you anyway. You're all tank top and sideburns and you drive a rusty Cortina with squealy brakes. She's more the sort you'd see with that glorious arse clamped tight to the pillion of a Norton, taking the vibes up her fanny and her arms wrapped lasciviously around some greaser's chest while they do a ton-up.

What?

Do you shiver at the thought of that? Or is this more something left over from the dream last night? Something weird, but not quite weird enough to stick in memory. It's fading fast, leaving behind just this stain in your head that's coloured your day since you got up. All you have now are the disjointed images of a girl with a backpack, and a pub, and how there was something funny about the rooms. What was that thing with the rooms again? Nah... it's gone, all of it garbled and meaningless like dreams usually are, papered over by the accumulated dross of the day which is already up to your knees and it's barely ten o'clock and, hell, isn't the morning dragging?

The best bit of the mornings are when Smollet goes for a dump at ten – regular as clockwork, he is. Yep, there he goes... then the office relaxes a bit, and Bernie's regaling you with tales of his travels in the Highlands and Islands. It always sounds like high adventure the way he tells it, high adventure in your own country, where the hills are of Himalayan proportion, and the whiskey tastes like nectar – water of life, Bernie calls it – not like that foul stuff you get from the off-licence, so maybe you should load the car up

with gear this summer and go take a look yourself. Bernie's a good guy, bright as a button, though he must be nearly sixty by now – and always a laugh. If you could pick your dad, and you didn't already have one – though he's been dead a while now, and irreplaceable of course – Bernie would be a good choice.

The line's almost dry now. Another ten minutes ought to do it. Maybe you could nip out at lunchtime, take a look at the maps in Smiths, plan a tour or something – if not this year then next. Funny how these things get a hold of you, isn't it? Maybe you could do an article or something, try selling it to Country Walking Magazine. Yes, okay, they've rejected the last few dozen pieces you sent them, photographs and all, and maybe that's because you just can't figure them out, or your stuff's crap and what you think you see when you take a photograph isn't the same as what other people see.

All you want is someone to say: 'yeah, that's pretty good, Chris, we'll take it'. Then your whole life would light up and actually, *you know,* mean something, short of half an hour in the cupboard with Sara of course, which would pretty much eclipse all else. But do you really mean that? Who else in this damned office your age has a copy of Blake's poems in their briefcase? And if all of those without Blake want the same half an hour with Sara, then maybe that's reason enough for you not to.

Maybe there's more in Blake for you than there would ever be in Sara Rainsford's pants. She hardly looks the sort who'd appreciate the mist at two and a half thousand feet anyway, stand around in awe of you while you fiddle with your tripod. No, what you want for that is the girl with the backpack, the one you dreamed about last night. You'd not be dragging her anywhere. She'd be setting the pace and you'd be skipping after her like a little puppy trying to keep up. If only you could remember more of the dream. Have you seen her before somewhere? She looked familiar. Or was that simply the dream telling you stories and having you believe in them?

Okay, so here's Smollet, back from the bog already, his copy of the Sun hidden in a folded up drawing, like that's going to fool anyone. You don't suppose he was actually fiddling with himself in the trap do you, while he ogled the tits on page three? Ughh, don't think about it. He's old enough to be your grandfather and there's nothing like the image of an old man's withering functionality for taking the glorious mystique out of sex, for reducing it to a banal

and ever so mortal little squirt of spunk.

Here comes Sara again, never looking once in your direction, and you leaning there on your drawing board, all poised and mysterious with your brand new super-quartz-hundred-meter-he-man-watch, like you're not of this mundane world, more the world at two and half thousand feet, and wouldn't you be better showing some interest in me, Sara, because I'm different, and going places? Just not the places any normal, sane person wants to go.

Nice scent as she wafts by, by the way. That's the second time she's been in here this morning. And though it always looks to you like she's flirting with Felix Schaffanacker, him with the biceps and the 'tash and the pubes-for-hair-perm, could it be who she really wants to flirt with is actually... you?

No, I don't think so either.

Hell, Chris, you've a whole heap of life ahead of you, and you're twenty five and this looks like your start. So what are you going to do with it? Already five years apprenticed to this damned place, another three tied to this same drawing board, an HND coming out of your ears, and all you're doing is spending your days literally watching ink dry!

Ah... now Smollet's noticed you're idling, and he's coming over with a roll of drawings and a memo.

"Take these to Barker's, will you, Chris? Drop 'em off with Beatrice."

You've been out of your time three years and he's still treating you like an apprentice, but you head off anyway, if nothing else for the change of scene and the fact that Beatrice is always a mysteriously edgy treat.

"Righto, Mr. Smollet."

So where are you now? You're on the top corridor of course, all hushed and shadowy and blue-carpeted, and you've got the drawings tucked under your arm and that memo from Smollet to the gaffer – the top gaffer that is, Mr Barker, the director himself.

His office smells of stale fag-smoke and has about it an air of ferocity, like the cage to a silverback that might burst open any time and him come strutting out, hair standing up on his back. How many severe bollockings and sackings and general chest-beating rant-ravings has that room seen, you wonder. But before you get that far there's the ante-room and the woman in the blue dress, Beatrice, sitting behind her Silver Reed, clackety-clacking, and the

sudden cut of it to silence when you walk in. She never smiles, has a way of deflecting all questions. A beautiful woman, maybe twenty years older than you. A woman in her *forties*, yet sexy as hell, and always a blue dress, as if to match the carpet, and the scent of her and the look...

"Hello, Chris," she says. "Just leave it on there."

Which is pretty much all she ever says, this guardian to the God of men, this man most feared. But at least she knows your name, and that's more than you supposed, I mean, a woman like her actually knowing your name. The difference between Sara and Beatrice? Well, the former calls to base instinct and what comes most naturally to a man, while the latter calls to something else, something, even at the tender age of twenty five, you can only describe as spiritual. Sure you could probably work yourself up to the shagging of a Sara and make a reasonable go of it... but Beatrice?

Hell, Chris,...

You wouldn't even know where to start.

Chapter Twenty One

Short and squat, like an onion, and tweedy, he's sucking on a briar pipe, sitting on a little bench in the lych-gate of the church as you walk by. The light's going, like it always is, but there's a last spark of reddish sun lighting up the tower of the church, drawing attention to it, like it's significant tonight in a way it never has been before. He seems in no hurry and for some reason unknown to you, you're anxious for him. He's old, as old as you will be one day, and not much light left in him, and you want to see him safe.

"Shouldn't we be getting indoors?"

He responds with a smile, seems to be seeing things you can't even imagine. "No rush is there?"

"Not for you maybe. But I wouldn't want to miss last orders."

Meaning what, Chris? Surely you can see it's already too late for this old timer. His legs are getting slower, his demise is inevitable and no bad thing because when it's your time, it's your time, and time, as you should know by now from all that funny stuff with the pocket-watches, isn't all it's cracked up to be, all of which means... he'll be okay. But still, you resist the temptation to let him go just yet, to let him slip through your fingers, because then there'd be a gap in your life too big to fill.

Like when you lost your dad.

You join him on the bench and he turns to you. "Won't be around for ever, you know?"

"I know, Dad."

Because in this moment he is indeed your father, the man you go to for the answers – at least until you realise he's just been making his way as best he could all this time, like you, only for much longer, that he doesn't have all the answers, and sometimes he makes stuff up – not to make himself seem big, but so you don't ever feel too small. So is it any wonder you can't bear to let him go, because even though you know now he doesn't have all the answers, and you love him all the more for that realisation, there'll be no one in your life to smile and say they're proud of you, like a father does, or should, and that's a lonely place to be, no longer sheltered from all those unanswerable questions, so while you're crying quietly inside for him, you're also crying for yourself.

"I'll be in shortly," he says. "You get along now."

And you wish you knew from which part of your life you were dreaming this, if your dad's already gone, or yet to go, and what's the point of this place if it never opens out to anywhere else. Or is it that the limits are in your head, and like the stepping stones that time, not all obstacles are real, and it's only in a quiet closed-in place like this, a place that's not changed and never changes, you'd ever work that out, I mean not in the world at large with all its varieties of experience.

And now the wind's getting up, sending dry leaves skittering, so you leave your dad sitting there, turn your collar to the weather, and make your way down to the inn alone.

The door gives way to the tinkle of little bells and you're hit with that warm fug of inns from long ago: pipe tobacco, the scent of beer and food. There's that lively hubbub, the click of dominoes upon polished wood, the whack of darts.

My, it's busy in here tonight!

The landlord looks up like he knows you, a ruddy faced man in a crisp white shirt, no smile in him, but he manages a curt, respectful nod; you're a regular here, regular enough to have him reaching for the tumbler and the whisky bottle: Old Fettlecairn. He knows what you like, wastes no time serving up a generous measure of it, and it's already on the bar waiting. He's a polished host, welcoming, serious, something quietly solicitous about him too, like you could tell him your deepest, darkest troubles, while for answers he'd point to the little shot glasses lined up, on the shelf, behind.

Meaning what?

The answers are as meaningless as the questions?

"Evening, John," he says. "Bit cold out there tonight."

He knows your name, which is more than you do, knows the names of everyone in here, you suppose, knows their favourite tipple, can tell at a glance if, after the challenges of their waking day, they're up for company, or if they just want a quiet table alone.

"Cold, yes. Wind's freshening."

You say this every time, you think. It's like a code, like a set of passwords to a deeper understanding. If only you knew to what end. Sometimes he calls you sir, sometimes John. You've a feeling you're not actually called John. Not topside anyway.

"Room's all ready for you," he says. "Put this on your tab then shall I?" He winks at you. Another little conspiracy. If only you knew what he meant by it. "Settle up in the morning, eh?"

"On the tab? Sure. Right you are. Same room is it?"

"As always, sir, unless you fancy a change?"

See? He called you sir. When are you sir, and when are you John? Anyway, you don't think it would be a good idea to change rooms. No sense risking the one life you've got on a game whose rules you don't understand!

"I've a feeling..."

"A feeling, sir?"

"That I'm about to do something stupid. Tomorrow I mean. You ever get that feeling?"

"Ah... the devil of self doubt, sir. Get that all the time."

But he's just like your dad now, comforting you with platitudes, except then he's motioning with his eyes to your table. The woman in the blue dress is waiting, glass of red wine before her – rich, mysterious. She's half in shadow, firelight adding a flickering uncertainty to her form, as if she might de-materialise any moment, so you'd better be quick! There's just the steadiness of her eyes you can be sure of, a steadiness that draws you towards her. You smell tobacco, look around for the tweedy guy, wonder if he'll make it before last orders, but she erases that thought with a little shake of her head.

"Let him go," she says.

You sit down with her. Breathe.

Remember never to ask her anything, Chris... I mean John, I mean... sir.

"Are you afraid of what comes through that door?" she asks.

You look to the door of the inn. "No, I was only hoping someone... my friend... my quest for knowledge... that he'd catch up with me before it's too late. Before Last Orders, I mean."

"I didn't mean that door. I meant *that* door."

For a moment you're no longer at the Inn. It's an office, and the glass of wine has morphed into a typewriter. There are blue carpets and the stale smell of aeons of fags. She motions with an eyebrow to a door, beyond which sits the boss.

"Oh... *that* door! Yes. It's true, I was always afraid of what was behind that particular door. There are rumours old Barker tears people limb from limb in there. Even the smell of it puts me on edge."

"Why?"

"Because what's through there can ruin my life. All it takes is a

word, and I don't understand the rules enough to be sure of what's coming, and anyway I'm just delivering this stuff, then high-tailing it before the beast comes shambling out and beating its chest."

"I want you to go through that door," she says. "Go through it now."

"I was afraid you'd say that. But I've not been invited."

"Do you think it makes a difference? You should go."

"Why?"

"Because you're afraid of what's on the other side. No other reason."

And for no other reason than she gives you strength, or permission... or something... you do indeed get up and go through the door.

You're expecting a big man behind a big desk and a bank of telephones, and him shouting into one of them, but instead all there is is a toilet and him sitting on it, his eyes fixed on his newspaper and a pair of melonous appendages on page three, and he's so transfixed by them, he doesn't even notice you.

He looks ridiculous.

You don't get it.

What's the point of this?

What's she trying to tell you? That we're all just human? That the gods do not walk among us? Or is it that sometimes those we mistake for gods, aren't really gods at all. They're not even devils.

Just men...

But then again, since we're dreaming here, there's a fair chance what I'm looking at is some aspect of myself, this guy, my ego-self perhaps, sitting on a toilet, gawping at a pair of tits while he purges himself.

What is it in myself I need to get rid of?

Old stuff, half digested nonsense.

Gas, wind.

Fart it out, man.

Get rid of it!

Eh?

Then you're back at the inn and you find the woman in the blue dress is touching your forehead with her fingertips as if to transmit this ugly thought, and now she lets it go, sets you free of it and drains her glass.

"You ready?" she asks.

"Ready?"

"To go up now."

You take one last look at the entrance to the Inn, but you know your dad's gone, been gone a long time, actually, and there's no use asking those old questions any more, that there's just this little bit of life to be lived before you take your turn on that bench in the lych gate while the velvet night closes over you, and the wind raises a stir at your parting.

Then the Landlord's ringing last orders, so you seal your fist around your key and you follow her upstairs. If sex can be a mystical experience, you're about to find out, but the chances are you'll remember none of it in the morning, indeed you might wake any second now on account of the sheer excitement you feel. Then all there'll be is this strange feeling as you launch into your day.

Something eerie stirring in the pit of your stomach.

Chapter Twenty Two

"Chris?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you awake?"

You weren't, but you are now, your eyes snapping open to a moment of confusion while you work out where and when you are.

Okay, of course. Don't be stupid: it's the bothy, summer, '87. You feel like you've been asleep for ever – must be the air, or all those winkles you ate.

"Was I snoring?" you ask.

"Not that I noticed."

"Okay, that's good. You all right?"

"Yes. Quiet, isn't it?"

You're thinking you're the only two people in a hundred square miles. It's bound to be quiet, though you don't tell her this. Maybe she just wants to talk. Or make love. Both of these possibilities terrify you even though you seem to have carried something over from the dreaming that you can best describe as a deep erotic longing – not that the erotic always equates to sex.

"Too quiet maybe," she says. "Unsettling. Can't sleep for it. Weird, I've always enjoyed it before. Maybe I should head out in the morning, find myself a party and some noise."

"You think?"

"Not really. Hate that. Hate noise. Parties, and stuff. Just the wind or a bit of rain against the glass would do. But this quiet... it's like the world's holding its breath, and I can't breathe for it."

You listen. She's right, the silence is oppressive. You'd fallen asleep to the sound of the fire in the grate, but that's long dead and cold now. Perhaps you're still dreaming, and lucid, like can sometimes happen in dreams. Yes... the world is holding its breath, and what it's waiting for is the moment you finally ask her something, and kick off a chain of words that'll influence the rest of your life. And if you're dreaming anyway, it doesn't really matter does it?

So go on then.

"Jen?"

"Hmm?"

"Don't go to India."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just have a bad feeling about it, that's all."

"A bad *feeling*? I need more than that, Chris. What's up?"

"Something I dreamed, maybe."

"Just now?"

"Hard to say. Weird, I know. I can't explain it."

"So what do you suggest instead?"

"Why not spend more time bumming around the UK, or Europe? Why do you feel you have to go all that way to find yourself? Like we were saying earlier, it's how you see things that's important, surely? And you can find the exotic in the smallest of places if you only know how to look. If you see with your eyes, I mean."

"Sure, but I've already found myself, Chris. I'm on the road now so as not to lose myself again, that's all. And I need a longer road than England can give me. And maybe that road's about to fall into the sea. So where would you go?"

"The Yorkshire Dales. Why not explore there?"

"Too safe, Chris. I did the Dales when I was sixteen, did the whole place in a month."

"You can't have looked very hard though, not very deep. Did you look under every stone, behind every tree?"

"I know what you're saying, but in the Dales you're never more than a mile or two from a teashop, from ham and cheese sandwiches, a nice pot of tea or a cool lemonade and a slice of cake... or a quaint old inn where there's beer, and a pretty little room for you to shower and sleep in clean sheets for the night."

"So danger's the key for you? Hardship?"

"I think so, nothing like waking up of a morning thinking I might lose my life today, for making you feel fully alive."

"You're saying it's better to live five minutes like that than a long life keeping yourself warm and safe."

"Damned right."

Yes, you can relate to that, but does she really mean it? Are you not blind-sided by the fact she's a woman – more than a woman, that you're projecting the image of a goddess onto her? And you're in awe of the potential she offers you – if a woman, then the ecstasy of sex, if a goddess, then ecstasy of another kind. But what if she were a man? You'd be thinking he was merely full of shit. The thought disturbs you. You couldn't bear for that to be true.

She holds up the key now, the key you found in the sea and gave

to her. She dangles it from the cord, lets it swing a while like a pendulum as if to lure you into a mesmeric trance.

Key to her pants, she'd said. Remember that?

"Want it back?" she says.

Is she bluffing? Is she testing you? You're still feeling a little humiliated by the fact you've not set foot on the mountain, while not only has she climbed it, she's spent the night on it, and you're disturbed too by the thought of the bothy door opening and the mountain-man you wish you were standing with a full beard and a hard on and wanting what comes naturally enough to most men, or at least men who aren't you.

Think you're man enough, Chris? she's saying; *Man enough for a girl like me?*

"Sure," you tell her.

She tosses it over, you catch it. "Doesn't mean I mean to try it in the lock though."

"You don't want to, full stop? Or you're just afraid the key won't turn."

"Ha! Sure I want to. And yes, of course I'm afraid the key won't turn. But maybe I'm more afraid of what's behind the door."

"Oh?"

"Is it merely human, or is it godlike?"

"You talk weird for someone your age, you know? You talk like an old man. For sure, you're an old soul, Chris. Been round the block already a hundred times. A thousand, maybe. Don't mean that in a bad way. So what is it that you want from me?"

"Only for it to mean something."

"What, like marriage and everything? Get out of here! You only met me yesterday."

"I would like to know you, really get to know you. Question is, are you willing to let me? It's not the key to your pants that'll unlock any of that, is it?"

"Key to my heart then? Hard to find yourself in someone else's heart, Chris, unless you've found your own first."

"You told me you had – found yourself, I mean. So it's more you're afraid of losing yourself in the distraction. But what if we never truly find ourselves, Jen? What if everything we think we know about ourselves is wrong, or worse, a dangerous self-deception. What if we could forget everything we think we are... then what's left... that's who we *truly* are."

"You speak like someone who's still dreaming. But I grant you may be right."

"How would we know if we were dreaming?"

"Want me to come and pinch you?"

"You're just testing me."

"You've worked that one out then?"

"Did I pass?"

"So far."

"That's fine, then." You toss the key back at her, she catches it. "Go back to sleep, Jen."

"Okay, you too."

And you do sleep, eventually, and you dream.

It's one of those late, late dreams, and deep, as you plunge into that last still and seemingly bottomless pool of small-hours REM. You dream of your dad in his blue NCB overalls, like you saw him that time in a photograph from the pit. Late nineteen-sixties maybe. You're underground with him, deep in the earth in a tunnel and the whole damned world piled on top of you. The tunnel ends in a blank wall of striated rock that doesn't look like coal – more sparkling like diamonds or crystal. It's been drilled, ready for blasting – long sticks of charge fed into the holes - and your dad's tamping down, sorting out the wires, running them back to the firing post, a little box with a silver handle that you twist. This was his job in the long ago, shot-firing, when there were still mines in Lancashire, this forcing of a road into richer seams. And with a reassuring smile he gives you the box, then a nod. It'll be okay, he's saying. Clear the tunnel, Chris. Twist the handle, break yourself out into sunshine.

Well, go on. DO IT!

So now you're awake and the bothy windows are all steamed up, sunshine pouring in, dazzling you. Jen's bunk's empty, her stuff's gone, and there's a smiley face finger-painted in the glass by way of parting.

You're torn between what that means, and what the dream meant because right now both seem of vital importance.

Your dad's been gone ten years, and it wasn't the mines that killed him. He never knew Thatcher, or the bitter strike, or the spiritual oblivion of redundancy. It was a more vital life he knew, but his life ran out before time ran out on him. So you blast that tunnel wide, clear the way, wake yourself up to the very sunshine

he promised, but also to the biggest sense of regret and loss you've known since the day he died.

I mean, why all that smart-talk, Chris?

Why didn't you say you'd go with her all the way to India? And so what if you both got your throats cut along the way?

You want to know why not? Because it's not what you wanted, or needed. Either of you. And what you're afraid of is what you've been afraid of admitting all your life, that what if you're right, Chris?

What if you're right?

Chapter Twenty Three

You're on that road to the Inn. But now you're driving, and the road is the lonely one from Malham over the moors to Arncliffe, or at least insofar as the dream is telling you it is. This doesn't mean the inn is at Arncliffe, though it well might be, for all you know. That's just the way it is with dreams. They shift things about willy-nilly, more for meaning than for the spatial reality of things; so you have to live the meaning of them, while in life you live the mere run of events, believing them to have meaning when in fact they do not.

The feeling you have as you drive is one of both exhilaration and regret – exhilaration that you're on that particular road in your old MX5 again, and regret because it's your last run out before the climate levy kills the car and old polluters like that one are finally taxed off the road. This is what the dream is telling you, sucking in the relevant facts from a waking life you no longer recall in any great detail, other than informing you of your love of this car, and the fact that, like all mortal loves, it cannot last.

But then life has no meaning, without the limits that contain it.

Except of course the rich are still driving their gargantuan four-by-fours, because the tax is nothing to them, and you resent your sacrifice while they're still laughing over champagne and caviar. And when the planet's reduced to just a few habitable zones, they'll be the ones living in them behind high walls and the rest of us left out on the scorched earth to die. And the absurd thing is they'll still be unhappy.

Why is this important?

Have you become politically active of late, Chris?

You park the car outside the Inn. The light is going, like it always is, adds a bottomless lustre to the paintwork which you've polished up to a flawless shine. Then you enter, and while the Landlord's pouring you out a glass of Old Fettlecairn, you slide your car-key across to him; surrender it, so to speak. He takes it with a nod and a suitably sober set of his jaw, appreciative of the sacrifice you're making for the collective good. He hangs the key on the board, behind the bar. There are hundreds of keys already up there, hundreds of lovers loved... and lost.

All of this seems unjust, until you remember we were trying to save the planet – well the poor people were trying anyway. The

rich, as usual, the ones who could have solved it at a stroke, never cared much about anything except being rich.

"Did we manage it?" you ask him. "Save the planet, I mean."

It seems a stupid question, because where would you be dreaming this from if it wasn't somewhere topside on the dear old earth. Unless there's something weirdly disembodied about the dreaming, and you'd rather not consider the possibility of that just now – that you might actually... be dead already.

He demurs, softens his evasion with a smile, slides your drink across. Not his business, you suppose, what goes on topside. He just looks after the inn. Except there's always been something about him, something Mercurial. At times he just seems to tell you what you want to hear, but he knows more than you give him credit for, maybe everything, and for all of his modesty when you ask him about it, maybe all *you* are is a dream going on inside of him.

What if he's old Hermes himself, like the alchemists of antiquity knew him.

Then you'd better be careful, John.

You feel hot, tired, like you've had too much sun, driving your car with the top down all day and no hat, so you take your drink outside, sit at a table by the door beneath a red parasol. The car's already gone, and you're missing something, but it's not the car. It's your dad. And you're feeling lonely, feeling like things aren't going too well topside, that, actually, giving up the car is the least of it. And just as you're thinking you could really do with someone to talk to, be it the woman in the blue dress or the old tweedy guy, you notice a little bell on the table at your elbow, and a notice on it that says: "ring for service".

So you give it a ding, wondering who the inn will turn out this time, because that's another thing – you've only ever to ask and, though you never know who's going to turn up, and you never know their name, it's never pointless – they always have something useful to say, if only you can listen. So this time a waitress comes out, lights a lantern on the table for you, keeps the darkness at bay, secures you safe in a bubble of amber while the sun sinks and the stars come out.

"Hello John," she says. Her voice is soft and warm and welcoming. "What can I get you?"

Do you know her? No. She's young-ish, and pretty. Always pretty, aren't they? But that's hardly a crime and you cannot be

blamed for wishing it, cannot really be blamed for anything here. And likewise, maybe the destination you move onto in the morning is determined solely by the nature of the baggage you arrive with and divest yourself of.

"You have a menu?"

Yes, she has a menu, hands it over, smiles, sits opposite you, crosses her legs, takes out her pad and pen, awaits your decision. Her whole demeanour suggests there's no hurry. You can take as long as you like.

"So much choice," you tell her. "I can never make up my mind."

"Want me to come back?"

"No... please. Keep me company for a moment."

Oh... hold on!

You have a sudden feeling you once took a photograph of this girl's bottom, but it would be awkward, to say nothing of indelicate, to ask for confirmation of this admittedly dubious and possibly incorrect detail. The characters here are not without the appearance of feeling, and being, so we should always avoid the potential for offence, even if it's only to avoid hurting our selves.

"I miss that old car," you tell her.

She understands, manages a look that is both patient and sympathetic, then full-stops it with a click of her pen. It's sufficient to show sympathy the once, she's saying, but not drown in it. We must move on as quickly as we can; we learn nothing by mulling over the same old emotions and the circumstances that gave rise to them. To do so, we might as well have died.

So, your choices John?

The items on the menu are blurred, moving, unstable. They're also written in broad dialect and though you feel you should have a general grasp of it, you're struggling.

"Sorry," you tell her. "I can't read it. Can you recommend something?"

"Have patience," she says. "Look again. Don't get lost in the words. Just go with what you feel."

So you look at the words as they shift around, and sometimes they settle down, stabilise into gibberish. Some of it feels right, feels wholesome, some of it does not. So you make your choice based on your gut feel, point it out to her, though you still don't know what you've asked for, other than something to fill this hole in your soul.

"Nice one," she says, then goes away to fetch it.

Chapter Twenty Four

It's raining. Hard. And you don't know where you are, well... not exactly. The van's battery died an hour ago, and it's going to take a couple of days now to charge her up through the roof-panel, even boosted by the portable solar array you've been carrying in case of emergencies, like this one. It's been on a red line since Fort William, but the public chargers there were all broken, as were the ones at Arrochar, and Carlisle before that. So far then, you've been on the road a week, though only actually in motion for a couple of days, and the Isle of Skaravaig seems no closer now than when you first set out.

You could have taken the train of course, but they're unpleasant things now, dangerous even, no investment for decades, the tracks lacking maintenance, buckling in an ever more freakish summer heat, unreliable toilets, and carriages prowled by psychopaths – all of it expensive to boot. Even that would have taken two days, then pitched you out at the Kyle with an aching arse, and no more idea how you were going to make the last hundred miles or so than you do now.

The advantage of the van is it's bigger than your car was, and you can camp in it – it has a little gas stove and everything. The downside is still the range, which is always about half what the manufacturers claim, and then half of that again when you can only afford to buy the damned things on the used market. You've still got the house, but it's trembling these days in the shadow of the city. Redevelopers have been pestering, and you're sure to sell it, having quit the world of mending broken minds, or rather trying to mend them. Indeed as you think back over your career, you doubt you managed even to mend a single one. And the fruits of your labours? A failed marriage, a woman out there somewhere who hates you, and a pair of kids who think you're a dick. But on the sunny side, there's another woman who says she loves you, and one who, once, a long, long time ago, wanted you to hike with her all the way to India.

Sure the house has long felt like a kind of anchor, fragile as it was, but it's time to let it all go, Chris, like that old open-topped car you used to have, remember?

Those days were fun, weren't they?

As for love, how can she mean it? That woman has a brain the size of a planet and an appetite... well, the appetite of someone starved of love. What the hell does she see in you?

There's a lesson in all of this of course, but you're a little late in the learning of it, even if it's true, which you're not sure it is, but anyway, maybe in fact it's never too late to make sense of things, even at your age. What was it Pirsig said? He of Zen and Motorcycles. I don't know, but somehting like: *Live like you're going to live for ever and live every day like it's your last.*

But isn't it the truth, most of us just waste our lives, squander our days on things that ultimately do us harm? Most of us never think about it, and just get on until some morbid illness claims us, but even those of us who do think about it are no wiser for having seen any of it coming.

Seen what coming?

Hell, I wish I could remember.

So you're on the road – or rather you're just off it, parked on the grass verge, pulled safely over. You've gas for the stove, and supplies to see you on to the next stop, and you're the only human-being in a radius of fifty miles and it's pouring with rain. That much is fact, which is all you need to know.

You've got your passport and visa in case the cops want to make a deal of it, but they're not likely to bother you out here. It's the cities you have to watch out for, anywhere where there's still a bit of money – the border crossings too, and routes from the ports where there's a growing black market. But here? This is the last great wilderness of our islands, long ruined and monocultured of course. But the Scots are re-wilding as best they can, instead of manicuring and putting it behind a pay-wall like the English. But that'll be the work of several lifetimes, and the weather's wilder than it was, warmer than it was, wetter than it was, The Greenland ice is sliding into the North Atlantic, pushing up the sea-levels and the Amazon's been burning again all year, so no one's sure how that'll work out any more.

As for you, right now you've the web for company, but the bandwidth out here's sufficient only for text and sound – no moving pictures. Just stills. You've been addicted to current affairs of late years – just can't leave the damned stuff alone, endlessly scrolling the dross of the world and none of it you can do a damned thing about. For your personal therapy, you've been trying to wean

yourself off it, listen to music instead, rediscovered New Order and their Substance album from '87, so you listen to it while the rain hammers and you flick back through your old monochromes.

'87, Chris?...

Yes, yes. I know.

It's been largely working – the personal therapy – something soaking out of you at least. And then this idea to pick up where you left off thirty years ago, finish photographing those damned bothies, which means if there are a hundred of them still, which you doubt anyway, you've only another ninety nine to go, because you never did get past that one on Skaravaig, did you?

Some current affairs inevitably intrudes. There was that last item about Russia invading one of the Baltics, under pretext of defending a Russian ethnic minority. And the Baltic states being European now, and allies of NATO, are wanting help and I don't see how NATO can avoid it this time, but that help is probably going to trigger world war three, so one can understand the circumspection. Or it may be the delay is just to weigh up first if profit can be made by war, and by whom. World markets are tumbling while the gimlet eyed hawks in the USA talk of the limited and strategic use of nuclear weapons. Then there's the somewhat fractious state of home affairs...

Hell, we're definitely back to the eighties.

But wars are facts too, and maybe that's why we indulge in them now and then, I mean as a relief from the amorphous fog of uneventful living. At some point the whole of humanity has to spill blood, twist its face in anger, scream and vent itself in an orgy of killing. Call it a re-calibration or an excretion of evil.

Not much we Brits can do of course having been stymied and shafted every which-way by that BREXIT thing that dragged on for close on a decade. And as if to rub salt into the wounds, the Russkies flew a Bear the length of the Mall last weekend as if to say what the fuck are you going to do about it, and have promised to do it again. And why is it, all your life, the world has been falling apart one way or another, without ever going all the way and is it the world or is it you, or is it both of you that needs this constant maintenance, and how come you're so bad at it, anyway?

Solar's not much good for charging vehicles, is it? especially in the gloomier north. It takes for ever, but it's better than nothing and free of course, gives you plenty of time to think in the meantime,

and you never did tire of thinking, did you, Chris? You'd do better with a generator, but that would be to defeat the object, and if they caught you, they'd fine you more than the van's worth, since you can only buy petrochemicals on the black market now.

So here you sit, in the middle of nowhere, and you doze and you wonder what you'll find when you get to Skaravaig; if the crossing still runs and if that private army you've read about will turn you away. But you only want to look and see if the old bothy's still there, and if you can get a picture with the mountain behind it, then maybe even climb that damned mountain, like you never did, and all in memory of Jen.

You check on the girls from their Insta-streams. You're using a fake ID of course, otherwise they'd block you. Abigail will be eighteen now, trying hard to make herself look like a woman, or at least attractive to men, and more attractive to them than other women. She hires the clothes, the colours, and she's had her skin inked piecemeal fashion at pocket-money prices. There's a trend now for girls to have their faces done, and you're relieved she's not gone that far yet. Men have been doing it for ages, but that's their lookout, makes them look crazy-weird and intimidating, like they're possessed or something, which you suppose we all are, one way or another.

Cassy's the older one, twenty three now, working at some bullshit job in the city from what you can gather – but that's the only kind of decent paying work there is now, and you're lucky to get it. Anything else is still the same old minimum wage it always was, skivvying for scumbags. She doesn't post much, looks drained and thin and pale in her suit. Both look lost, somehow, as if unable to quite believe the world isn't how it's painted on social media. But then you were never there for them, Chris, not emotionally at least, typical pathology of the five, and then always two steps back from explaining reality, or at least your version of it, and all right, partly through fear of injecting them with your own angst. You were always like this camper van, parked out in the middle of nowhere in the pouring rain, the real action always taking place on the inside where no one else could see, and no one could ever get in.

Temperatures in Paris this weekend are nudging forty five, and the sun's been a killer on the continent for weeks. You'd swap a few days of that for what you've got here, and no doubt those Parisians would do the same.

You tap the display showing the battery meter. It's styled to look like one of those quaint Smiths gauges they fitted in the olden wind-up days to cars, like the one your dad drove. He used to tap them, make sure they were reading right, that the needle wasn't sticking, he said. So maybe you should tap yourself the same way because this can't be right either, can it, Chris? No, I don't mean the battery charge; I mean you, and the way it is, the way it's always been.

The needle doesn't move of course. It just leaves a fingerprint on the screen, and that annoys you, because you like things to be clear, even though they never were or are or ever will be.

Chapter Twenty Five

The landlord shoots you a glance to check you're okay. You're not. There's this little bore of a guy at your table, invited himself over – white suit, fancy Fedora hat, pointy little beard – and he's been talking for what feels like hours, not so much to you, or to anyone really, but *at* whoever has the misfortune to be within earshot. His head's tipped back like he's addressing the ceiling. You are his audience, and he presents himself on stage as an old-school intellectual, a philosopher, a psychologist, an iconoclast.

It sounds good, what he's saying. It's eloquent, learned, earth-shattering. There are lots of names dropped in, mostly obscure, but not so obscure as to leave you with a blank expression. Yes, he sounds ever-so-plausible, but he talks too much and too loud and there's something else that's troubling about him, but you've not the confidence nor the intellect to counter him, to pull him up, and say: "Hang on a minute." And you need to find a way of doing just that or he's going to dominate the dream.

So on he trots. You know him. Of course you know him, but for now the dream is withholding his name, because names are not important, only the emotions aroused by the symbol of threat he represents. And he represents vanity, humbug, influence, and your fear of deception, of seduction by the fine words of yet another damned self-styled magus, and your inability to measure them properly.

As he talks it seems there are clouds of little numbers coming out of his ears – all the integers – and he's weaving stories from them in an obscure code. But all of this smacks of numerology, and you know that because once upon a time you were a mathematician, of a sort at least. And mathematicians can always fall back on earlier precepts if they sense they've gone wrong. Numerologists however have no such immutable foundation, and can only plough on, compounding their mistakes because their prognostications are unprovable anyway.

But, actually, you don't really care about him. He waves his arms, flaps his hands like a stage magician, rich in legerdemain. It's the woman beside him who really interests you. She's conspicuous only by her near-absence, by her quietness, almost faded out in his shadow. And from there she smiles at you, serene, like wisdom

itself. You suspect she's the more intelligent of the two, while all he does is blow his two-tone trumpet, a high twittering accompanied by an ever present low frequency farting sound.

She's his mistress, you suppose. Their body language suggests it, suggests also he's the dominant one, and maybe he's a hell of a lover when he stops talking, which you suppose has to be the case, otherwise what's so elegant and mysterious a beauty doing with a pompous, narcissistic windbag like that?

So, who are these people to you, for all people in dreams represent some aspect of yourself – well, nearly all – but you have a feel for the passers by tonight and all the weary dead, and there are none. He is what you fear you could become yourself, a preposterous windbag, talking bollocks, believing bollocks and boring the pants off everyone, while she is what you actually seek, what you have always sought: true wisdom and understanding, and such a thing as that is always shrinking from the sun, always elegant, understated, beautiful, ephemeral.

And it’s always a woman.

One minute it's in the pastel shades of a sweet-pea's bloom, the next it's in the dusty patterns of a butterfly's wing, and always gone tomorrow. But hers is the real knowledge, the real wisdom, never quite attainable this side of the veil. And she says nothing, never reveals herself, hides herself always in the fog of her unlikely lover's blather.

You smile at the landlord, manage a conspiratorial wink, but the woman is sharp, misses nothing, grants you a little nod of understanding from the shadows. She's pleased you've seen through the pomposity of her lover. You're right she's saying. He's all hot air. So what are you going to do about it? How do you peel the woman away from the braggart and charm her enough in the brief time remaining so she will open up to you and reveal her wisdom?

You have a piece of paper in front of you, and ink and compasses from the old days of drawing boards and line, so you say to him: "What you mean is it's like the problem of squaring of the circle."

This isn't true. Actually, you've no idea what he's on about, but such people can read anything into anything else, so your words ring true to him, even if they're false. There. You see? You've stopped him in his tracks. It's the sort of vague statement a semi-paranoid intellect can seize upon as a mirror, and see reflected in it

whatever they want to see.

How to draw a circle of area equal to that of a square, by compass, line and Euclidean geometry alone?

It's impossible, was proved impossible in 1882, but does not prevent cranks from still attempting it now and then.

Thus you begin your own sleight of hand, learned on drawing boards long ago, at the end of the age of industry, before that plunge into endless penury. He's mesmerised by this ancient skill with line, these ancient tools, by the flicker of light upon the compass which he views with the awe of a priestly wand.

There is indeed a beauty to technical construction, and it soothes him. You draw the square, project the axis, construct a triangle, inscribe a circle, find tangents, and where the tangents intersect the square, there you strike your radius from the centre and draw the circle, then label it all in Greek, and with a certain pedantic beauty. At last he can stand it no more, makes to grab the paper, but you stay his hand.

"Not yet," you tell him. "We must let the ink dry first, or we shall smudge the corners."

He freezes, does not want to smudge the corners at any cost. You swivel the paper so he might at least feast his eyes upon it, but forbid him to touch, until the ink is dry. He agrees, takes out a notebook; he's thinking to plagiarise it, this construction of the circle squared, claim it as his own invention. But not even Euclid managed it, and neither have you. It's a near approximation. There are others better than that but you cannot remember them, and none are so beguiling as this one. It will take him time to work this out, but in the mean time, he's absorbed by it. And while he's absorbed by it, his woman fades from his awareness. So, you seize your chance, rise to go to the bar. "Another drink?" you ask. He shakes his head dismissive.

Go away, he's saying, I'm thinking.

He may even end up believing your deceit, then writing a book and basing an entire lecture tour upon it, dazzling the world with his flapping hands. Many have done the same in other fields, misdirecting the minds of generations. But his crime is not a deliberate deception. He believes in himself well enough. His crime, if such you can call it, is merely Ego.

"I'll come with you," she says.

So now you're at the bar with his mistress, and she's looking at

you like you're some sort of genius. Not because you know how to square a circle, because you plainly don't, but it seems you have mastered the technique of running rings around pretentious windbags, of sticking their heads up their own arses. And in this you have also loosened the bonds, released the wisdom they so often overshadow. Or at least in the dream you have. Out there, topside, you're likely still oppressed by such people as you ever were.

"You've got a room here?" she asks.

"Yes."

"And is it the same one as usual?"

You look to the landlord for confirmation. He nods.

Ah... wait!

You've dreamed something of this nature before, or perhaps the dream's supplying you with sufficient insight to allow you to think you have. What she seems to be saying is you can choose a different room, then you'll wake up at a different point in your life, topside, then you can choose a new direction. It's dangerous of course, like the djinn's three wishes: always prone to unforeseen circumstances. But your djinn's not here to stay your hand tonight, and you're feeling lustful.

You hesitate to ask which room is best for you, but the Landlord seems to know. He slides it over.

She's looking at you, seductive, challenging.

Well do you want it or not?

Wish you'd bought that red Cortina in '82, instead of the blue one with the dodgy carburettor? No problem. Just get the right key from the Landlord. It doesn't mean your old life goes away, you still live it out of the same room each night, only you have two rooms now, and you're living in two dimensions of time, rather than just the one.

But that other life; do you lose sight of it? You're thinking you must, otherwise you'd be living with memories of a future you never had. And what if it was a good future? Well, then you'd spend your life wondering what decisions you needed to make to bring it about, and that wouldn't be like having a fresh start, would it? It would be like living your life back to front, trying to regain something you once had that was good, and with no guarantee you weren't going to put your foot in it any second and never realise it again.

No, once it’s gone it's gone and you only gain a perspective on that from some other level of the dream-space, and it's not this dream space either because you've no idea who you are in here. You wish you could ask the woman in the blue dress, except she'd never tell you – she just opens doors on the unexpected for you, gathers together the things you need to know, whether you like that or not. And then there's your djinn who's purpose seems to be less the granting of insight and more holding you back from your own stupidity. There's only the landlord seems keen for you to try it. It is, after all in the nature of him as innkeeper. You look once more at the key, wonder what it is this woman means to you.

Keep the same room, Chris. Anything else is way beyond your pay-grade.

The Landlord slides your drink over.

"On the tab, sir?"

Chapter Twenty Six

Funerals become increasingly familiar gatherings as we age. I mean, as we near the ringing of our own last orders. They are increasingly faddish too. With the decline in religious ceremony there's been this awful rise in popularity of the tear-jerked secular eulogy, much loved by the movie industry of course, and a perfect opportunity for some appalling ham to stand up and perform their toe-curling guts out. But it's also difficult, to say nothing of undignified, for any ordinary soul truly stunned by grief who feels obliged to do the same for a departed loved one. Reality is so different to play acting, don't you think? yet from the outside it's so often hard to tell the difference. I mean who among us these days is play acting their life, and who is truly living it?

They wanted you to do it – the eulogy – didn't they? but you refused because Ted had already told you not to. He said it was important for him to leave this world the same way he came into it, with nobody having a clue who he was, or even thinking they did. It was for this same reason his son, Jake, wouldn't do it either, a fact that earned him some disapproval for not allowing us all to laugh at those aspects of Ted's nature that were so opaque to reason, likewise to pretend that life in general was wonderful and mysterious. And you might convince yourself of such, were it not for the fact his last weeks were so difficult, made bearable only by opium acquired on the black-market and administered by Jake, there being such a shortage of legal palliatives and the nurses to administer them now – like maybe one per ten thousand head of population, and all of them so overburdened with paperwork it's like the healing and the easing of pain just gets in the way of more important matters.

You tell yourself you're immune somehow, that you'll live for ever, untroubled by age and observing life as ever as you go along, not subject to its vicissitudes like everyone else. But of course, it's probable a not dissimilar fate awaits you just a little further down this particular line in time. You wonder at the wisdom of ending it when the going gets too tough, when the point of living has no meaning, but that plunges you into an existential abyss, leaves you staring transfixed, like a rabbit in the headlight's glare, for the same can be said of any stage in life.

You're not sure how you're going to help Ted with his understanding of life, his grand thesis, not with him on one side of the veil and you on the other.

Still, not to dwell upon such morbid matters, the lad organised a decent wake, held it in the senior-staff common room. He didn't invite the higher ups. They'd made things difficult fussing over doctor's notes and sick pay, even during Ted's last days, as if the death of a good man were of less consideration than keeping to the letter of procedure.

Ah yes, the higher ups, the "type one" personalities drawn to admin, and tending towards pathological in the narrowness of their view and in inverse proportion to their intelligence. Of course your own days are numbered now. What with Ted gone there's this sense in you of a chapter closing, oh and the fact you said something rude to the vice-chancellor this morning might also have something to do with it.

Never mind, you still have the private practice work, though that's become a bit of a drag, since even after all this time no one you deal with seems to actually want to get better. They all claim to want to see the world from a more comfortable perspective, yet shirk the responsibilities involved in achieving it. If it doesn't come out of a blister-pack, they're not interested – simply don't have the time.

Conversation with Jake earlier tells you he's selling his second gen e-camper, and you're wondering about putting in an offer, taking to the road, touring what's left of your country, looking for what bits of green are still worth the photograph, and which can still be accessed without a credit card. Maybe you could even load her up and head off to Scotland in search of Skaravaig... and Jen.

Sure, you'll be okay. There's that bit of a pension, so you'll not starve, but if that's all there was to life, it would hardly be worth the bother of showing up, would it? A world without God, Ted once said, was a world for the robots, for the machines. Human beings need to find God, indeed that God is present whether invited or not. Any God will do, and even if you don't believe in God your life tends to go better if you can at least pretend to yourself that you do.

I don't know where Ted found his God, but a man as serene as that had to have found something, somewhere. Don't you think?

Anyway, here we are, you holding back as usual, observing from the sidelines of the room, not mingling, trying to be invisible – your

usual avoidant neuroses kicking in. You used to fight them, but now you don't care, just watch them run and they turn round and look at you with big, sad eyes, disappointed they don't frighten you any more.

And then she's there, seeking you out, materialising from the crowds in their sombre black, and she in a defiant red. An impressive woman. Bold, confident, wise.

Sophia Klein!

"Chris, isn't it?"

You've not seen her since that time in Switzerland, by the lake – oh, years ago – but you've been thinking about her a lot recently, even taken to reading some of her papers... and her books. Such strange ideas these high flown psychoanalytical types have: beguiling, Romantic, impossible.

"You don't remember me," she says.

"On the contrary. I do... of course. I'm just a little... surprised. You knew Ted?"

"I was a student of his. Haven't seen him since those days, but he made a big impression. And I was in town... so."

Remind yourself: Sophia Klein: private practice in Prague; confidant of kings; former lover of the great Kadinsky who you heard went mad last summer and shot himself. And you remember her wanting you once, at least for an afternoon, though that seems so long ago and absurd, you might be imagining it.

"He used to speak of you," you tell her. "But he never said you were a student. You'd think he would."

"Oh? Why would he?"

"A celebrity analyst? The higher ups would have had your face plastered all over the faculty intranet-page."

She knows I'm being sarcastic, slips seamlessly into the joke. "Then maybe that's why he never said anything. Anyway, I shipped out in my second year. Went to Vienna. Never came back." And then: "Really? He remembered me?"

This seems to have touched her.

"Said he preferred your theories to Kadinsky's, and that most of Kadinsky's better ideas he obviously stole from you."

He also told you wisdom was always a woman. No wait. He didn't say that. You're projecting, Chris. Back off.

But she's thinking of something else now, looks contrite. "Actually... I just wanted to say thank you."

"Oh?"

"That time, in Switzerland. That thing with the key."

"Key?"

"Room key."

"Ah... that..."

"I don't know why I did it. I thought I saw something in you, I mean... I did... I did see something in you, but that was hardly the way to get to the bottom of it."

"Well, it's not that I wasn't flattered. And I really don't know why you did that either, and it's true it wouldn't have solved anything for either of us. Though having said that, there's hardly a day gone by since when I haven't kicked myself for not being foolish enough to take you up on it anyway."

Ah, well done, Chris. She accepts your humour with a laugh, and dimples, accepts also your feeble attempts at charm, but perhaps only because she judges you too old now to make a serious nuisance of yourself. No wait, her pupils are dilating...a hungry blackness to them...

That was unexpected. And such big eyes. Careful you don't fall in...

Damn the behaviourists for taking all the mystery out of things!

"I'd just made my break from Igor," she explains. "Professionally... and in other ways. I suppose I was a little dishevelled, a little disordered. He was angry as hell. Really punctured his ego. Threatened to have me killed. You must have heard the stories..."

"I... never moved in those circles, Sophia. The royal court, and all that. He always sounded like a pretentious old windbag to me."

She thinks upon this for a moment. "Yes... yes he was. But we all believed in him. And for such a long time, which is a lesson in itself, I suppose."

There's an awkward silence now. It goes on for a moment too long, or at least that would be in the normal run of things: neither of you knowing what to say and assuming it's because there's nothing more the other wants to say, that it's time you were mingling, moving on. Except there's so much more you do want to say, and nobody else in the room you're even remotely interested in, but it's all blocked in your head and won't form itself into words, so you let it go.

But the moment runs as moments do, opens out like a fast-

flowing river, stagnates suddenly into a broad reach, into a serene lake, clear all the way to the bottom. And she's still there, not looking at you but at everyone else, observing, with you, and you're half turned into one another, each nursing a half finished glass of wine, your elbows lightly touching. And you know that's significant, this fitting together like the pieces of a puzzle, this comfortable coupling up... so much so you catch your breath.

You once said she was an eight, a challenger. Well, she certainly challenged you that time, but from her demeanour right now she's suddenly more like you, an observer, an unenlightened Buddha, but clearly on the path. A five on the Enneagram. But that's retrograde for her which means she's in trouble, which brings out the protector in you.

"You have some interesting theories about dreams," you tell her.

Yes, all right, it's a clumsy opener, but you desperately need to break some ice, find out what she needs from you, and if you're willing to give it.

"Ah... well. Theory's too strong a word," she says, "A theory that can be neither proved nor falsified isn't really a theory at all, is it? It's just a flight of fancy."

"I suppose so. Then I take it you're no longer pursuing those ideas? Not involved in research?"

"Oh... I still think about them, but not as a researcher. I'm not even practising therapy at the moment. Resigned from the Federation, actually."

"Really?"

"At times of political crisis we risk becoming tools of authority, deciding who's sane and who's for the Gulag."

"You think it might come to that?"

"Already has. Europe's disintegrating around the edges, same as everywhere. The evangelicals are getting stronger, the brown-shirts with them. It'll be like the States soon, everyone chasing stories and none of them actually true. You know? A cure for homosexuality, and schizophrenia is possession by the devil. All that medieval stuff. We can't work in such an environment as that. Jung tried in the thirties and it tainted him for the rest of his life."

"Things are tense here as well."

"I've noticed. I'd go further. I think they're about to fall apart."

"So... what brings you to England?"

"I'm looking for a place to hide while I write books in secret.

Hide them all for better times."

"Hide them?"

"When even hard-nosed journalists in western democracies are going under cover, Chris, it's not the best time for academics to be sticking their necks out. These are brutal times, and there's a lot of blood to be let. We just have to make sure it isn't our own."

"Well, I wouldn't write anything on a computer... that's like scribbling it on the Town Hall steps and adding your name and address."

"Don't worry, I've gone back to pencil and paper."

This small-talk sounds vaguely political now, therefore dangerous. "We should be careful, Sophia. Everyone has ears. And of course your phone's listening."

"No... I use a proxy."

"Is that... legal?"

"Not any more. What about yours?"

"Oh, I rarely carry a phone these days. It's much safer to say you forgot it than to be found using proxy apps on it."

"Makes it awkward though. I mean, if you're stopped for any reason... having to go home and get it, then hand it to the cops to prove who you are?"

You realise you've moved to a table now, sat staring into the space between you. And then she says: "As soon as the phones hooked us all up into a one big network they started sucking our brains out, replacing them with demons, don't you think?"

"Sure, except the demons were already there. It's just that now we've not the brains to deal with them, so all we see are demons everywhere. And there is no cure for insanity on that scale."

"We're agreed then, that we're wasting our time?"

"Don't all analysts come that conclusion eventually, turn their thoughts instead to themselves? To self preservation?"

She smiles at that. "You've got it bad. I remember you that time by the lake. Your expression told me you'd already come to that conclusion by then."

"Maybe."

She's aware of the sombre atmosphere, tries to clear it: "What else did we talk about that time?"

"In Switzerland? Oh, it was mostly shop. I forget now. I must have seemed like an uncultured idiot."

"No. I remember you looked nervous, weight of the world on

your shoulders, but also very charming."

"Actually... I was having some marital problems, as I recall. I was also intimidated."

"By me?"

"Of course by you."

"Explain."

"I've always been pedestrian in my practice, Sophia. The practical mechanics of the mind: that's me. I started out as an engineer, way back as a kid, you see? Redundancy forced a change of direction, but I still cling to the nuts and bolts of what we know works for sure, based upon the data – inputs, outputs, that kind of thing. You and Kadinsky, and others like you... you were the pioneers, the explorers coming back from exotic lands with all your strange tales. I was in awe of you."

"Why the leap to psychology from engineering?"

"Ah, long story. Met a girl once, and she suggested it. We spent the night in this old shieling on the isle of Skaravaig – that's way up North. We were strangers, yet it was probably the most memorable experience of my life, though it's over thirty years ago now. She was a doctor, freshly qualified, but seemed adrift somehow, taken to travelling. Asked me to go with her."

"And did you?"

"No."

"Ever wish you had?"

"All the time."

"*Interesting*. So why didn't you?"

"I've thought about that a lot over the years. The nearest I can get to for an answer is I've always tried to sail a steady course, you know? Always resisted winds coming at me left and right, unexpected, anything that threatens to tip me into the ocean, because the ocean's deep and I panic if I can't feel the bottom of things with my feet." You smile, listening to yourself. "Sorry, you'll be having to charge me for your time if I go on any longer."

"No, I enjoy listening to fellow shrinks. Our neuroses are so much more interesting than those of other people. And rich people in particular. Rich people are boring, so easy to nail. And you're far more open than most of my clients. But this steady course you mention; where's it taking you do you think?"

"I don't know. Same place we're all heading eventually I suppose. Death, fresh beginnings. Landfall's always just beyond the

horizon. But I've always felt it's better to be resolute, even if you don't know where you're going, than weaving about all over the place. At least that way you never come back on yourself and waste time going over old ground."

You take a breath, not sure about steering your conversation in this direction, but in the end you can't help it. "Sophia, I have the feeling I've dreamed of you, recently."

"Oh?"

"And here you are. A prophesy of sorts, then. I hesitate to read anything into such things, but I suspect it means something."

"Why do you hesitate to read anything into it?"

"Because we rarely get the prophesy right, distort it too much through the lens of the ego."

"True. It's wise to be cautious. You don't reject the idea of retro-causation then?"

"No, I'm not that much of a materialist. It just got me thinking about the future, and how it's not fixed, how it's more of a probability that certain events will occur, also that it seems to be in the nature of things that whatever could possibly happen, does happen. There's a time line where we never met that day in Switzerland."

"Yes, and one where you bring that key up to my room like I so desperately wanted you to."

"Em... quite." You're embarrassed, but her next line really floors you:

"Your blushes tell me you would like to be my lover, Chris, but fear to suggest it."

"There's not a man in here who wouldn't want that."

"This is probably true. But seriously... it's you I'm sitting with. Are you embarrassed by such thoughts? Do you think I would scorn your attempts to flirt with me? Trust me, I would not."

"What are you saying, Sophia?"

"Obviously, that we should pick up where we left off in Switzerland."

"And in the morning?"

"Ah... good question. Honesty is required. I'm looking for a companion, Chris. Someone of my own choosing, a man I *choose* to be with. A man who does not threaten me with bodily harm or emotional blackmail, yet is capable of stimulating me. I need someone reasonably intelligent who can act as sounding board

while I write on the off chance there'll be anyone left alive on the planet in another twenty years to read it. I choose you. Now, can you be honest in return and tell me what you think... about that?"

So, what do you think, Chris? Or can you not think at all for the rush of blood to your head, which, like when trying to delay orgasm, you distract yourself from by thinking of other things. But wait... has wisdom come knocking on your door after all this time? Is she pushing it open? But weren't you listening She's not offering you wisdom itself, just bouncing ideas off your head to help the wisdom gel in herself, and then she'll tell it to you.

Do you have a problem with that?

You attempt a defensive tack: "Writing? You're still writing papers? I'm... I'm reading some of your stuff at the moment."

"Well, don't read too much. It's all speculative at this stage. Evasion duly noted, by the way."

"Em... bear with me."

"I shall."

"You wrote that every time we make a choice our time-line bifurcates and we go off in both directions at once. So by the time we get to middle age, say, we've so many time-lines running we cover a whole wealth of life-chances and opportunities. Our lives are multi-dimensional."

"It's one way of thinking about things, if it's true. But you can't test it. Kadinsky went mad trying. I'd not seen him for years but heard in the end they found him surrounded by papers on which he'd been trying to square the circle by geometric constructions – you know? the old philosopher's conundrum, trying to link back to heaven from earth, through geometry."

This pulls you up. Sharp. You've been thinking about Squaring the Circle as well recently. You used to pass the time in the drawing office with approximations, when things were otherwise slack. It was good practice for maintaining your skill with line – at least that's what you used to tell old Smollet when he caught you at it, and he never argued. But there's more to this, you're certain. "Squaring the circle?"

"Yes... strange, don't you think? So far as I can work out the problem is you need to construct Pi by line and compass, but you can only derive rational numbers that way. And since Pi's transcendental, well... it's impossible."

"In theory. Then how do we attain it?"

"By making a leap. Only humans are capable of such a thing. You can't do it with line and compasses, or a machine. It comes from making a connection... it comes from our dreams perhaps. Who knows?"

"Was it Kadinsky who wrote that it's possible to jump back in time, to a previous time-line. That you can do it through the dream?"

"No... he claimed that as his idea. It was my conjecture originally, something I got from a piece of speculative fiction, actually. So... you want to go back to the eighties. Is that it? You want to make a different choice, go with your girl next time?"

"Am I so transparent?"

"Yes, but remember: the eighties and all that followed are seriously overrated, depending on if you were rich or poor. Me? I wouldn't want to live through any of that again. No, stay with the present, Chris, with this time-line."

"Depends where you think it's leading."

"Well... right now it's leading you to me. Come with me, Chris."

"Is it possible though? You must have had a reason for writing about it."

No, Chris, forget that. Listen up. Sophia Klein has asked you to go with her.

Sophia Klein!

"Well," she says. "It's like me saying I have an invisible daemon, sitting with me. I might have. It's impossible to prove or disprove. So it involves an element of belief on your part."

"Unless it works. Then I would know."

"No you wouldn't. How would you? We lose all sense of identity in the dream. It's like we come in without a past. So we wake up back in time, and we've lost all sense of the future we once had. All we have are memories of the past we've had up to that point. And who's to say you won't make the same stupid decisions anyway? Who's to say making any other decision than the one we originally made isn't even more stupid?"

Chris, Chris... back up. She wants you to go with her!

All right, all right, but you've been with women before, so why should this one be any different?

"Our dreams influence our waking moods," you tell her. "And our waking moods influence our dreams. So if the dream has a view across all our time-lines, no matter which time-line we're travelling,

we could still be influenced by all the others, through the dream's awareness of them."

"Ah, now that may also be true, Chris. And it's a very interesting point. It's what I want to write about. But you must pause and think to what end."

"I don't know what end."

"Neither do I. But you agree it's a delicate structure, vulnerable to harm. If we go crashing in with a view to simply getting our end away with some girl from our past..."

"That's not what I meant. Nothing so... crass..."

"Then what?"

"It's about purpose, about doing the right thing."

"We can all second guess our lives, Chris. But what if... no matter how imperfect things seem for us right now, the path we're on is actually the right one. We just can't see it, because our vision is too narrow. Kadinsky made the error of taking his ego into the dream with him, and throwing his weight around in the usual way. Don't make the same mistake. Ego's no match for what you'll find in there. That's why he went mad."

You know this. All your life you've known this, to take what pearls the dreaming offers, and let the rest lie, and tread softly, because the dreaming has a life of its own. But still, it intrigues you, that the dream-masters, like her, should speculate on a possible way in, and once in, then by some method unknown, journey back in time. And if that way exists then it exists for a reason and cannot be altogether harmful, can it?

It's all a question of how respectfully one travels.

She's thinking of something else now, thinking back a long time to the early lectures she sat through, listening to a much younger Ted, though even then he was in his tweeds and sucking on a briar pipe that had gone out hours before. "Did Ted ever talk to you about the Inn at the Edge of Light?"

You think back among all the strange things you talked about with Ted, and there were many, but the Inn at the edge of light wasn't one of them.

"I'm sorry, I really don't recall."

"Don't worry. Just wondered... he was following a line of enquiry... oh, such a long time ago now. He either abandoned it, or simply never wrote it up. Nothing in the literature you see?"

Something strikes you then, though you're not sure if it's

relevant, and you hesitate to say for appearing stupid. "He told me once he had this recurring dream about a pub in the Yorkshire Dales. Could that be it?"

She lights up. "Yes! I get that one too, you see? The details are always infuriatingly vague on waking, but the feeling I have is one of a serious archetypal structure. I once spent the entire summer searching for it – I mean for real – but I never found it."

"Like a shared dream space then? But... do such things exist?"

"My experience tells me yes."

"Only... he once said he'd dreamed of seeing me there."

"I've dreamed of you there too, actually. It's one of the reasons I looked you up."

"Oh?"

"It's also why I'm sitting here now. The path we're on, Chris... I've a feeling it merges from here and we go on together. This is my understanding, whether we like it or not. We are part of a group, each with our own purpose but bound to meet up in the curious nexus of that place. There, our stories intertwine and we become for each other whatever the dream chooses. Maybe your girl is there too. It's up to us of course if we take any notice of that, or even if we are receptive enough to it. And I think we are."

She's pierced the normally robust membrane that separates your waking from your dreaming, now – at least those dreams the dreaming means to keep to itself, and a detail leaks out, floods your head. You have a memory of a woman from the factory, decades ago... what was her name? Beatrice... blue dress, sexy as hell... secretary to that old blowhard... but wait... now you remember a fragment of the dream.

"You were with Kadinsky."

She wrinkles her nose. "I may have been. I've been dwelling on his death a lot, pondering my part in it."

Sure, you're at the bar with her, drinking whiskey. Yes... yes... it's a vivid recall – the sound of darts, the click of dominoes, the chatter, the warm fug of inns long ago, scent of beer and cigarettes... you will more of it to come through but it's as if the very act of willing it closes off the memory.

But you were there! With her. You back away from it a little. More details come to you. Puzzling this time, then alarming. It's not that long ago since you dreamed it. How long, Chris? Months perhaps? Surely, no more than that. Yet you only recently learned

Kadinsky died by his own hand last year – driven mad, she tells you, over the insoluble philosophical puzzle of squaring the circle. And is the reason she said it the reason now you see yourself with compasses and paper?

"What is it, Chris?"

"I think it was me who drove him insane... only after he was dead. Is that possible?

"Well, who's to say you didn't play your part? But rest assured, it was me who killed him. I mean, psychically, though I longed to physically often enough. And I killed him because I had no choice. He was going nowhere, just inflating himself for his own stupid edification. Without him I stood a chance of progress." She drops her card onto the table.

"The Inn might signify the coming of the end for all of us," she says. "Or it might be our way of realising better things. Not just for ourselves, but for the world. We need to talk about that, and I need to write, and while I'm writing I need a man to keep me grounded, or sure as hell I'll go the way of Kadinsky, chasing something any bloody fool could tell me is impossible. So... leave this place, Chris. I'm told you were thinking about it anyway. And come with me."

You check out her card, black background gold lettering, rose motif: "You’re in Northumberland?" This strikes you as a little offbeat for someone like her, someone with a practice and apartments in... Vienna, was it?

"No one will look for me there," she explains. "Or if they do they’ll just write me off as having gone to seed, or mad or something anyway. It's a secret place – a cottage by the sea, and no one goes to places like that at our age, unless it’s simply to die."

"Death and sunsets. Sounds idyllic."

"Sunrises. It’s on the east coast. So, you are with me? Yes?"

"Yes, I’m with you."

Chapter Twenty Seven

There's a garden to the rear of the inn, and the grass, thick with creamy clover-bobs, smells sweet. There are tables with rose-red parasols, and a stout but low bounding wall with a kissing-gate in it. Beyond, there are lush meadows, thick with buttercups, then a line of distant forests and beyond them, rising like billowing sails are the higher fells, beautiful just now in the last pink of light.

You've set the camera up on a tripod and you've been studying the landscape, framing it with your fingers, trying to capture the essence of what you can see in a reduced format, because what you see here is too much for any mind or heart to bear. But you can't do it. It's necessary to include the whole, and to do that you have to use the 28 mil. lens, which always was a cracker, but it makes the mountains look so small, compressing their verticals to nothing, and you realise that for all of its optical excellence, it lacks a mind to retain the stature of your environment. The mind sees in different ways, and any way, it's pointless taking a photograph in a dream.

There's a waitress collecting glasses. You don't know her name but you have the impression you once took a photograph of her bottom. It wasn't here, but topside maybe. It's an embarrassing secret and you keep it to yourself because clearly she remembers the incident even less than you do. She's counting the glasses as she goes along, finds one missing, and begins to count again.

She counts nine, mutters that it's wrong, that there should be ten. She does not call them glasses though; she calls them cups.

You see something reflecting light from the wall and move towards it, thinking it's the glass or cup she's missing, but it's a bottle, hidden in a nook between the stones. You slide it out – a whiskey bottle: Old Fettlecairn.

"Sorry," you tell her. "I thought it was your missing cup."

"No matter," she says. "If you blow on it, you can summon your djinn, and ask her where the missing cup is."

You're thinking this would be a terrible waste of a wish, but there's still that liberty you took in taking a picture of the girl's bottom, and for which you're sure she was not adequately compensated, so it seems churlish to refuse her now.

"How do you know my djinn's in this bottle?"

"See for yourself."

So you blow a note across the opening and it makes you dizzy. When your head clears, there's a girl wearing shorts and a vest top, sitting under a parasol, sipping down the last of a cold beer. It looks like she's been walking all day, is deeply tanned and sweaty. She plonks the empty glass on the waitress' tray. "Is this what you're looking for?" she asks and then to me: "Don't worry. It's my shout. All three wishes intact. Now you have ten cups."

As we sit there, a rainbow frames the fells. The colouring of it is bright and vivid. It's an allegory then. The ten cups, and a rainbow. You've seen it before in a deck of Tarot cards: "the ten of cups". It's a hopeful card, speaks of peace, of hearth and home, though you suspect this does not reflect your present circumstances, topside at least. It's an aspiration perhaps, or a missed opportunity. Either way it makes you sad.

The girl looks tired. "You okay?" you ask. "You look done in."

She smiles, weary, nods. "Seem to have been walking for ever," she says. "So many paths here, so many valleys and hills, and the paths stringing out over them, but no matter how far I walk in any direction, come last light, I always seem to wind up on that same lane heading right back here."

The waitress is cleaning tables now, looks up sharp at this, ears twitching. She looks at me, approaches under the pretext of wiping off a nearby table. "You should get her up to the big house," she whispers.

"Big house?"

"It would be a kindness. They'll set her on the right path. Otherwise she'll keep looping back to here."

"Right path?"

"She's not from round here, see?"

"But... I know her, I think."

"That's why she's drawn to this bit of you. Some connection, a fondness maybe. A feeling of something unfulfilled, a missed opportunity. But she's not from round here. Trust me."

"I'm not from round here either."

"You might think you're not, but you are. Trust me on that as well."

"How do you know?"

"Same way's I know I'm a piece of you, and not a piece of her."

You think you're understanding this, or a part of it at least. Or as usual maybe it's only the dream that's letting you think you

understand it, when in fact it's misdirecting you, rearranging the scenery behind your back, that it's never wise, actually, to think you're wise in the dreaming. Even when you think you understand a thing, it's best to be prepared for the revelation you don't, that while the dreaming might be your story, you're not the author like you think you are, and it's only by going along with it we honour the dream and, through it, also ourselves.

Did she say "the big house"? That's new.

You want to know where the big house is, and even as you think it, you see it, in the distance, across the meadow. It's a Neoclassical pile like something out of a Jane Austen novel, and there's a smudge of path leading up to it from the inn, through a kissing gate in the wall, then across the green and the buttercups. You're supposed to go, go with the girl, but the light's fading and you're worried you won't make it back before dark, and something's telling you it's not your time to find rooms at the big house just yet. You look at the waitress and she reads it in your face.

"It's all right. I'll set a lantern for you," she says.

So you ask the girl if she has anywhere to stay tonight, and she tells you the inn's full, but the landlord says she's welcome to camp in the field. So you tell her it's likely there'll be rooms at the big house, and they'll see her right for the morning.

"I've not seen that house before," she says, gazing out across the way. "Why have I never seen it before?" She doesn't seem reluctant to go, more intrigued she's never noticed it. "Will I get a shower there and a good meal, do you think?"

You check with the waitress first, who nods emphatically, so you tell the girl "Yes." Then you offer to walk with her. She hoists up her pack, but you hold out your hand for it. "Let me take that." You shoulder it, surprised how a thing that looks so heavy can actually weigh so little. Then you set out together.

Butterflies rise from the meadow as you pass, and the sun is warm on your necks. After a while you glance back to see its lower limb has just grazed the roof of the inn. Your shadows run long and straight towards the big house.

"Beautiful isn't it?" she says. "Don't you just love the Dales?"

"Always loved the Dales."

From the perspective of the inn, you realise you and the girl have become the couple in the Tarot. There are only the children missing. And as you think it, the children appear, a boy and a girl,

your younger selves perhaps, laughing and gambolling like lambs. Surely this might have been, but you suspect it wasn't, otherwise why should such beauty as this make you feel so wistful?

"I know we're dreaming all of this, John," she says.

"Yes..."

"I feel like I've been dreaming it for such a long time. You?"

"Oh... I suspect I'm dipping in and out."

"But we do know each other. I'm sure of it."

"I'm sure we've met yes."

"And we mean something to each other?"

"Yes, I'm certain of it."

You come out of the meadow and scrunch your way up a gravel drive to the entrance of the house. There's a doorman waiting, uniformed, smiling.

"It's like a country hotel," she says. "Not mentioned in my guide book though. Oh... I'm sure I can't afford this, John. It's too many stars. Look!"

"It's on me," you tell her. "Any anyway, you deserve it."

The doorman gives a faint bow, opens the door wide. You have a glimpse of warm light from chandeliers. There's the scent of sweet-peas and honeysuckle, a piano playing somewhere deep in the house. She turns to you. "Won't you come in with me. I think I'll be afraid to go in on my own."

You catch sight of the doorman, behind her back. He's smiling still, but shakes his head a fraction. No that won't be possible, and just as well, you think.

"You'll be fine. Afraid of nothing you are. Walked the High Atlas on your own, the Karakoram. Bagged every Munroe by the time you were twenty five."

"I did?" she asks, then nods. "I did. Yes."

"Maybe we can catch up again, once you're settled."

She holds you then, hugs you tight, touches her palm to your cheek, kisses you. You feel the dream shimmering, feel the whole of your body wired and tingling. And then she's gone. You hand her pack to the doorman, but he sets it against the wall. She won't be needing it any more. Your sense of love and loss is overwhelming, and you wish you could wake up and forget it, except a thing like this is going to be colouring your day for days and days. And since the dream is hanging on, you wonder if the doorman has anything for you, a snippet perhaps, but you feel you've strayed from your

own edge of light to somewhere even more remote.

There's a glass panel by the door and in one of the panes there's a smiley face, finger painted.

"Nice house," you tell him, and you mean it. There's something welcoming about it, in the light and the scent, and the cheery tinkle of crockery from the kitchen somewhere deep within.

He nods. It's growing dark now. He points to the light across the meadow, the waitress by the gate with her lantern. You're to cross the darkness, back to the inn.

"Wouldn't want to miss last orders would we, sir."

"Ah. No, I wouldn't want to do that. Not just yet anyway. She'll be all right?"

He nods, hands you a pebble, small and polished, a piece of basalt, a token from deep in the earth. "For the journey, sir," he says.

Like a pebble in your shoe?

You take it, slip it into your pocket, and set out. There's no urgency. The meadow feels cool and wet against your legs as you walk, and the light ahead is steady. Something big has happened here, and you've played your part, but you don't know what. The bottom line for you though is you still have your reality to deal with and more,...

You must make your peace with it.

Chapter Twenty Eight

You didn't attend your graduation, spent the afternoon in a bar with a girl instead. You never were one for fuss and ceremony. She was one of Charlie's models, actually. Things between you and Charlie had cooled by then, the postcard wheeze fizzling out for want of success and you supposed she simply didn't need you any more. Sure, she'd not asked for her key back yet, but you'd seen her out on the town with other guys often enough. It had always been a bit that way with Charlie, and that was fine for a while, but suddenly you were wanting something more solid, something you could build on.

So you bought the girl a drink and you chatted for a while. You'd seen her naked of course, through the viewfinder of that old OM 10, and you wouldn't have minded seeing her again, though this time without the interface of the camera. And there was something else. You'd seen her at a party, once before, maybe even spoken to her but you were drunk at the time and you're not really sure any more. As for now she's not much by way of conversation, so you've left things with an exchange of numbers, then you go home to your mum, who by this time has begun intermittently either forgetting your name or mistaking you for your father.

Your change of direction has changed you, or at least changed who you thought you were. It's deepened you, pushed you at times to the edge of what you'd thought were your own limits of sanity, had you questioning more deeply the meaning of things, what it is that means "more" and conversely what it is that means "less".

It's also confirmed you in your role as a detached observer of life, but has yet to enlighten you with the fact that of all the things you've seen, no one else gives a fuck, so there's little point talking about them except with your own exclusive kind, of which there are so few, and most of them so far up themselves they likely think you're as insignificant and unworthy as you think they are.

She's knitting and watching TV, your mum, and you want to tell her you've a PhD now, but you know she's no idea what that is. You might have said you were a doctor, but that would only have confused her. The only person you really want to tell, the person you've been thinking of all these years, is Jen, and you've not seen her in getting on for a decade now, yet can still play back in your

mind every second of the time you spent together, and every word you said to her, and she to you, every damned aching moment of that time on Skaravaig until you'd raised her to the level of a Romantic deity. And if that's not a sign of something, Chris, what is it? That you're bound to meet again one day? that fate demands it, and you've only to keep faith with that one idea for all your dreams to come true?

Yea right.

A couple of English girls were murdered, travelling out east a few years back. One of them was called Jennifer, and of course you'd always wondered about that, but there'd never been a picture of them and Jennifer's a common enough name. Robbed, throats cut, bodies dumped in a river, then a couple of impoverished local youths rounded up and, guilty or not, and hanged for it. Happens all the time.

So now your Dad's car's out on the drive, up to its axles in rust, the vinyl roof hanging off in strips, and your Cortina's out on the road like it always is. The clutch is slipping and the exhaust's blowing and the wings are bubbling, but you've not the cash to fix it up and that's a bind, this needing money to stay in the game – not like Jen, out on the road to India and trusting in fate to see her through.

There's a teaching position going in the department which you don't really fancy but you'll have to do it anyway, if only for a while until you're over your financial difficulties, while what you really want to do is work in the health service. But you're also lonely, and all you have going for you is this girl's telephone number, and you know that if she's not rung you in a couple of days, you're probably going to be ringing her, because Jen's a fantasy, and at the bottom of you, you've a feeling she's dead.

For now though, you seal yourself in your bedroom, four stout walls and a view of the hills – just the few chimneys and a brown smudge showing from the urban sprawl coming your way. You wonder why you're keeping all your old engineering stuff in here: your micrometer, your drawing instruments, your "Lissaman and Martin", your Machinery's Handbook (1985), even the old laminated cupboard-door you used as a drawing board for your school and college homeworks.

You take out the compasses, twirl them in the light: Rabone-Chesterman: the bees-knees, all polished and precise. They

measured out the wheels of Stephenson's Rocket, instruments like these, and the Sans Pereil; they designed the ships that took men around the world, to darkest Africa, to the Antarctic, and to the moon. But engineers are drawing with computers now, printing out on clickety-clack machines, pens whizzing this way and that. The drawings look flat, functional, no beauty to them any more and for all their fizz they never took us back to the moon, did they?

A man who was skilled with line was once a valuable man. Now he's an anachronism, and no matter how polished and reflective of the light, he's as worthless as these old compasses now, at least from a certain perspective, and you suppose the trick is to find that perspective in life from which a man is always considered remarkable, indeed a miracle of his own unique existence.

Might it have been Jen? I mean the miracle of your own existence, Chris. Or are you missing something in between?

Jen, Jen,... dammit! This is not normal. Something else is driving this deep, deep longing, but whether it's profound or pathological, you just don't know and for all your training you can't quite get at it.

You think back to that morning on Skaravaig, to that smiley face in the glass, fading as the sun took the dew. Such a beautiful face it was, a fun face, a face to wake up to every morning, and no regrets.

Time, Chris.

Time to let her go.

But you can't, can you? The djinn is out of the bottle on that one.

Anyway, you have that girl's number in your pocket, down among the spare change; it's not Jen's, like you want it to be, but you know you're going to call it anyway, and whatever happens there you know it's only ever going service some other need in you beside the need of what it is that's forever going to be contained in the enigma and in the idea of Jen, Jen whose last name you never knew, and who sometimes you wonder if you dreamed, except you have that one picture, carry it in your wallet still, print a fresh one off whenever it gets too crinkled.

Maybe it'll mean something to you one day?

Marriage, Chris? Kids?

It would please you to see your mum's face light up at news you were settling down, bounce babies on her knee – I mean before the time comes when she's too far gone to know anything any more,

when she retreats into the twilight world, half-alive, half-dreaming, when the daemons break though and dictate her speech and her memories. Sure a baby or two bouncing on her knee would mean a damned sight more right now than the fact of your PhD, probably mean a damned sight more to you too. And sometimes things are no more complicated than that, are they? No more than a moment's gut feel, and in you go.

Penny for a pound, and all that.

But the thing with kids, Chris, from the day they're born you blink and it's already twenty years gone, and no guarantee they'll even like you in the end, or that the woman you've sworn your loyalty to isn't going to wind up hating you anyway and be wishing she was somewhere else. And that's a long time, a great big chunk of a life, and by certain rules of the game you'd have to call it a fucking waste.

The A.I. we're rumbling out these days would certainly say so: BIG WASTE, it would say, but then there's something in your dreams that tells you to keep faith, that even when you feel the game is lost, it's worth playing on because while you've been thinking all along you're playing one game, you're actually playing another entirely.

Heard that before somewhere?

Yea, I think so too.

Chapter Twenty Nine

"Well go on, lad. Go on!"

It's a boozy night at the inn and someone's just spun the dartboard. So you're looking at it, ready to line up your best shot. But there are no numbers, no indication where the best place is to land your arrows and your team mates are urging you to let them fly anyway. You've asked them for a run down of the rules, told them you're an idiot and you can't help it, and it would be better if you understood the rules.

They've laughed good naturedly, welcomed you deeper into their bosom for your honesty, then offered you excited explanations, complete with exaggerated arm-movements, and every explanation is contradictory, so you wished you'd not asked. Maybe it doesn't really matter where you let your arrows fly then. Ever wondered that? So long as you do it in the right spirit it doesn't matter a damn if your aim is way off, if you hit the board or the rafters. And it's the same with life. No need to go changing rooms all the time. Keep the same room till you're done, Chris, and the landlord's ringing last orders.

Keep faith with it, man!

So that's what you do, and you get all three in the board somewhere and it raises a cheer from everyone, like you've made the perfect score, I mean the whole damned pub's in uproar about it, all except the guy with the little pointy beard who thinks he's god's gift and everybody else is wrong. He covers his eyes and shakes his head like you really are the idiot you told your boozy mates you were, but you've never seen him stoop to playing pub games, so what makes him such an expert anyway? It seems some people were only born to take the piss out of others, and by doing so artificially inflate themselves.

So you're a little high as you climb the stairs, a little wobbly too, all this after your second large measure of Old Fettlecairn. Your team won the game, but you've no idea how. Then you walk into your room to find a woman there and the sight of her sobers you at once.

She's at the dressing table, ivory silk nightdress, hair all brushed out and shiny and she's rubbing moisturiser into the backs of her hands.

She watches you, smiling, while you look around. You're thinking it's a posh kind of room for an old inn of a sudden, more like something you'd find in a high class European hotel – hints of Paris, hints of Prague, though why you're thinking Prague, exactly, you can't say. It must be a cross reference from your waking life. She reads the panic in your face, hastens to reassure you.

"It's okay. Same room. Looks a bit different, that's all. My influence."

"You mean... it's possible we get to share room with someone... sometimes?"

"For a time, yes... for as long as we want to, or need to. Do you want to Chris?"

Of course you want to – she's gorgeous. But do you need to?

She feels familiar, feels like a wife but isn't, not exactly anyway. There's the thrill for a start, the thrill of a woman's intimate silk against a man's skin, and the power in her smile.

And there's a memory.

No, wait! A memory? Can you remember things in dreams? Surely your life up top leaks away when you enter here. That's the rule. So maybe it's just something the dream is making up for you, the impression of another time, stripped down, idealised. So what is it, this memory?

Come on, Chris, tease it out into the open:

Wait... yes...

A plain room, small, clean, white walls, sandalwood-scented, and an iron bed squeaking. Indeed, you are three, the bed the woman and you. You are each the keepers and the cause of the rhythm, and she's ever so eager with the wanting of this thing which, slice by slice, roll by roll, squeak by squeak you are building to. And then laughter, sleep... a deep, sandalwood scented sleep.

Then there's a beach, all of it rock and shingle, and windblown. It's the North Sea coast, breakers pounding and the blue-green of it all foaming and churning; such a terrific energy to it, and you're walking along a green sward, the rocks and the foaming sea to your right, a low run of hills to your left, and a fast changing light under a glowering sky.

She has on a long coat, heavy against the weather, and her chin tucked into her scarf. There's an easy pace, an all-the-time-in-the-world sort of pace, and she's talking, telling you the most remarkable things she's discovered, and it all makes sense, though

for the life of you you can no longer remember any of it, only that sense of the remarkableness of life and all of it driven by the energy of the waves and the wind, and her words.

There are great turgid clumps of seaweed, beyond the rocks, stirring and bobbing like the heads of seals, and the light on their heads is all twinkling under a weak sun. But they're not seals, yet as they surge with the waves there's the thickness of life in them all the same, and you in the thick of them too, and as you walk a porpoise leaps for the sheer joy of it. It's a wondrous thing, a thing that puts you in mind of another time, once, when you realised you could be, that indeed you were, that you are, or at least can be both yourself and everything you're looking at, if only you could remember how.

When was that?

When was the last time you felt this way, that life was like one long post-coital moment?

Ahead, rising on the green sward now, there's a huge, fantastic ruin, still recognisably a castle, millennia-old, and she's telling you the story of it:

The story has you caught in a storm, she says, so you look for shelter below the ruined castle walls. Then a crack opens up and this wise old guy's beckoning you in, promising to show you something beautiful if you'll follow him, and how can you resist? So you're led into a chamber where there's an army of sleeping men, all swords and shields and chain-mail, and in their midst a woman, also sleeping.

She's the most beautiful woman in the world, of course, like they always are, I mean these women who sleep in myths and legends. On one side of her there's this elaborately carved hunting-horn and on the other a sword, and the old guy tells you to choose one and wake her up with it, that if you make the right choice she's yours to cherish for ever.

So you pick the sword, thinking to tap her on the arm with it, and make ready a defensive retreat, because there's this room full of sleeping men, all tooled up, and you wouldn't want to risk waking any of them by tooting on that damned horn would you? I mean, only a fool would do that! But the old guy says hold on that's not right, you're supposed pick the horn and blow and wake up the army, or the story doesn't work for him and he's wasted his time on you.

She's laughing as she tells you this, tells you the last guy who tried it blew the horn, and woke the army. But they were a ghostly hoarde and couldn't harm him, at least not in the flesh, but he lost the girl anyway, and he pined his life way lamenting it.

"But what does it mean?" she asks. "What the *hell* does it mean?"

It's a myth, but like all myths there's a key to the psyche in it, and she's trying to unlock it. It also has something to do with you, with the way your life's turned out so far, or might yet turn out, though you can't for the life of you remember, but only suspect it's all contained in the turn of that dartboard, and pinned down by the way you launch your triad of arrows. You tell her all of this in case she can make more sense of it than you, and she writes it down for later in a notebook – a notebook she has fashioned for herself from mushroom paper. True to her word, she does not use computers any more.

It interests her, this thing, how all that concerns you on hearing your fictitious part in this story is your pique at the wily old bastard, because there's no way you'd be stupid enough to blow your horn, and you want to know if you got the girl or not.

And she says, well I'm here now aren't I?

Sure. So you got the girl. It's just that you don't get to choose the girl you get.

And neither does she.

Chapter Thirty

Turns out you know him, this rich super-loony – or super-rich loony – who bought the whole of Skaravaig, bought it just like that, and just as well or you'd never have got any further than the mainland. The ferry still runs, but it's special trips now, just for supplies and vetted estate workers, and if you've no business there, you don't get to land.

The ferryman's explaining all of this to you as the outline of the island looms near, and ravishing it is too in the rich evening sunlight. It fills you with excitement and longing at the sheer beauty of it, and you're wondering, if this is typical of a journey into the past, then why all the warnings against it?

You treated him for the usual existential angst – the rich loony, not the ferryman. The ferryman seems not to need any help in that department, having worked out early on the best way to spend his life, what to value and what not to. And there's nothing like a life at sea for reminding you daily of what's real and what's not.

An orca breaks the surface, a porpoise maybe or a dolphin. You're not such a salty-Sam as you could tell the difference. It's riding the clumsy, butting bow-wave of the ferry and triggers something from a dream, a dull recollection of a mostly positive emotion, perhaps from years ago, but no literal details remain of it now.

Anyway, this rich loony: best advice for him was to give every last penny to the poor, go sequester himself in a spiritual retreat in the Himalayas, find a Buddhist master to pick up from where you left off. The retreat thing and the monkish anonymity would also have alleviated his paranoia that everyone he'd stiffed over the years was now looking to kill him, especially – and for reasons best known to himself – the Russians. And the chances are a good deal of them actually were – trying to kill him – and since the Russians have long specialised in slow and painful deaths brought about by exotic poisoning, you can hardly blame him.

But rather than do the authentic thing and travel out to the Himalayas and apprentice himself to a monk, he does what all rich people do: he buys what he can and disregards the rest, which is usually the most important bit, like a sense of humility. So he buys this Scottish island, builds his own retreat on it, hires himself a live-

in guru, and turns the Isle of Skaravaig into a kind of prison of his own making, with every ferry's arrival being greeted with the suspicion that should have been levied on the Trojan horse. As for your man, he's fortified the old estate house and has himself flown in and out by helicopter – aviation fuel as yet being exempt from the climate laws which thus far seem only to target the poor.

Don't worry, we won't be meeting up with him. Face-time with the formerly paid consultant – i.e. you, Chris, is hardly a priority for one such as he, plus it's hard for an alpha-oligarch to maintain face when he knows you've seen him in tears, albeit via holo-link. But he's been gracious enough to humour your Quixotic request to spend a night in the bothy he wasn't even aware existed, so we should leave it at that and be grateful.

There's just you for cargo this evening, oh, and a brand new luxury electric four by four, collected from Glasgow that morning, and with the range that caused the sour faced ghillie charged with driving it far less trouble than your own somewhat pedestrian conveyance, now languishing on the mainland, by the way, and hopefully charging up for your return.

He's your chauffeur now, at least as far as where the path strikes out to the bothy. Then another guy, armed with a hunting rifle takes over as your "bodyguard" for reasons he'll explain later on, and all of them lies, which is another side effect of wealth. Yes, the bothy's still there; the keepers use it for overnighting. They're rewilding the island, your man says, as you walk out to the bothy. Sure, there's boar and wolves now, hence the gun.

The wolves have sorted out the deer for which the gun had previously been the only solution, and the wolves also tend to keep the more adventurous tourists away. Yes, sir... a dinghy landed under cover of dark only last week, he says, thinking to bag the peak, but all they found of them was bones. He tells you this with a grisly kind of glee as if you're stupid enough to believe him. If self-consciousness had a Richter scale his would be several decimals to the left of zero.

No, he's not the kind of man one would normally choose for company, has a livid scar that runs diagonally across the whole of his face, nearly cleaves it in two. Fierce former gang-tats hide the worst of it but lend him now the look of a medieval demon. He speaks with an eastern European accent, and you only hope your rich loonie's paying him well, for you suspect little by way of

loyalty in him and that he might just as easily be turned assassin for the right price. He's not interested in you though, or your purpose, only that he's been told to watch you, so he keeps his conversational gems to a minimum.

You don't know what you were expecting when you finally come up to the bothy. To see Jen sitting there maybe, or at least for the memories to come rushing back? But they don't, do they, and why? Well, you've been carrying those memories all your life, Chris, no need to go unlocking them. That's not what this pilgrimage is about.

It looks pretty much the same from the outside, a fresh roof, and a new door, that's all. But there's a scruffy churn of quad-bike tracks all around which spoil the isolation now. Still, you had to expect some innovation in thirty five years, even way out here. The mountain's a surprise though, clear as a bell and bigger than you imagined, staggering really, and you're thinking maybe the climbing of it's beyond you.

Your bodyguard-cum-assassin moves aside, leaves you to whatever weird purpose you have for being out here. From his pack he takes a bivvy, gives it a shake and it pops out into a geodesic teepee the height of a man, all silvery and gossamer thin but with the strength of Kevlar. You're still an engineer at heart and marvel at the design of things, wish sometimes the contents of the mind could be as enduring, to say nothing of as yielding to analysis. He's not for joining you in the bothy then – pointed way of telling you – and you're glad of it. He pitches his bivvy out of sight, but you know he's watching, and since you already know there are no wolves, no wild boar, it means that gun's for you.

The bothy's been white-rendered inside and there's electric light from photovoltaics and storage cells. To your dismay you note there's even a holo-cast in the corner now so the ghillies can watch their porn in 3D. There are still the two bunks and a woodburning stove, but the mouldy old paperbacks have gone and with them the last vestige of your past, but then you'd always known it wouldn't be the same. The shovel for the latrine's gone too and you note a dunny's been tacked on the outside, because even wild men with gang-tats draw the line at defecating in the raw, as if the ground might have teeth and bite their arses.

The sun's about a finger's width from the sea now and you settle on the doorstep to watch. You've a hip-flask of Old Fettlecairn and you take a sip, salute the sunset with it, think back on a long life,

wonder too why the hell you're still alive and what the point is of witnessing the disintegration of everything you ever knew, including yourself, with tinges of arthritis in your knuckles now and the constant wow and hiss of tinnitus the perfect accompaniment to the perfidious collapse of all you once knew.

Sure it's plain to see what's happening here, with the west sinking back into a feudalism it was a thousand years escaping, and the east into a kind of self-inflicted, techno-surveillance, A.I. augmented authoritarianism. What wealth there is is now in the hands of rich loonies like your man here. They've bought your damned parliament, turned it into a pantomime, and they keep the rest of you at bay with armed thugs like this one, and rumours of wild bears and wolves to tear you limb from limb if you dare trespass on their shire. Dress 'em up how you like, deerstalkers and tweed, the gang-tats still show above the neckline.

And maybe it's because you saluted the sun, or there's something abidingly weird about the combination of your palate and Old Fettlecairn but suddenly there's this incongruous white horse coming out of the gathering shadows, and an old hippy sitting on it, rainbow robes to rival Joseph's, also grey dreadlocks and the age old stink of weed.

He ambles up, dismounts, seems a while regaining his feet. "You'll be Chris, then?"

"That's right."

And this'll be your man's guru.

You nod. Revenge is sweet. Your man might have found himself the real deal, scoured the earth for the pinnacle of human wisdom, but all his money got him in the end was an ageing stoner with eyes like piss-holes in the snow.

"You're not what I was expecting," he says.

"Oh?"

"Tweeds and a pocket-watch? I mean is that a *real* watch, man? Not battery or anything?"

"Yes, the genuine wind-up article. Both of them." You draw the watches up from your waistcoat pockets like a gunslinger.

"Two?"

Sure, you carry both now, one in the left, one in the right hand pocket, Ted's old beater, and your own.

"They tend to drift off a little," you explain. "One forward the other back. It's best to take the average."

He laughs approvingly at this, something good natured about him mixed with a twinkle of mischief. "You obsessed with time, or what, dude?"

"Ah, but if I was obsessed with time I wouldn't be relying on old pocket-watches like these now, would I?"

"True, I guess." You've succeeded in bamboozling him, seducing him a little also. Doesn't look like it would be difficult. "Name's Marcus," he says.

"Ah,.. as in Aurelius?" No, stop it, Chris. You're trying to look clever. Give the guy some space.

"Nah, just Marcus." and then: "No offence," he says, "but you look like someone out of the past, like Victorian times or somethin'."

"Well, Victoriana's always been a theme for me. Now, you... no offence, but you look like you're from the sixties."

"Ha, maybe."

Yes, maybe, but he's not that old. This guy was a kid the last time you sat on this doorstep. So he's most likely culled his looks from old vids, his patter too, calling you man and dude. No one talks like that any more. He'll be saying things like "groovy" next, saying you're "square".

And are you "square", Chris? Well, you never were "hip", were you? but you have acquired a certain something over the years, at least according to Sophia. Sure, no denying that. Or her. But if that's true, what are you doing way out here on your own? About to start photographing all those bothies again? Never did manage it the first time round, did you?

"Maybe I'm the future," you tell him.

"Ha, yea, maybe." He gives the horse a slap and off it trots, just a little way, then settles to crop some weeds.

You ask if he's not afraid the wolves will get it.

"Wolves? He told you about wolves? Ain't no wolves, man. All this re-wilding shit. They can't get nothing to last on this place. Plants, animals, nothing. Just curls up and dies, unless you feed it by hand all the time. It's like the place has been dead so long it's finally lost the will. Locals had a chance to buy it, but they didn't want it. Didn't even try, like they knew it was dead and cursed. Looks fine in sunlight, but all that thrives here are bloodsucking ticks, and they're real hungry, man, I mean since they cleared the deer."

You offer him a swig, and he takes it. He offers you a smoke and

you accept, just to be polite.

"So what's to be done, Chris?"

"About what, Marcus?"

"Oh... world and everything, man. Whole damned screwed up fuck of it."

"Ah... still getting current affairs, even way out here, are you?"

"Hard to shut it off. Leaks in, man. It's like a virus. Gets in your head."

"Well, not much we can do, Marcus. Look to our own selves, that's all. Treasure the years that are left to us. Saw some Orcas on the crossing. Couldn't help thinking they were checking us out, hoping we'll extinct ourselves before we make the seas uninhabitable for them."

"Think that's likely?"

"Extinct ourselves? Sure, or maybe we'll mend our ways and all become chilled out next-genners cherishing the earth and all in awe of the sunset, like this. Which do you think's more likely?"

He laughs. "So we each look to ourselves. No sense mending the world when we're broken inside, or we'd just render it back in our own fucked up image. Right?" He takes another pull at your whisky. "Damned good stuff this, man."

"Old Fettlecairn. The best."

See? You've misjudged him. He might be a guru of sorts after all, no way of telling really. But at least he seems like a nice guy, and you know how it goes: you can sit down with the most screwed up excuse for a human being and if you listen to them, truly listen, you always learn something worthwhile that you didn't know before.

"So, what brings you to Skaravaig?" he asks. "Old time's sake, says the boss. Something about a girl? That right?"

"Yea, something about a girl."

You take the pebble from your pocket, hand it to him. He turns it in the last of the light. It's polished now, worn smooth to a deep glassy black, its sheen having taken on some of the mystery of your life.

"It's a piece of basalt," you tell him. "Picked it up from a beach in Wales when my kids were little. Family holidays, you know? Been carrying that thing around with my loose change and my handkerchiefs ever since. Can't really say why. Something in my dreams maybe, something I can't remember. Or maybe I'm not remembering it right anyway, that the stone came to me out of the

dream itself and I just woke up with it in my pocket, and the story of how I found it is how the dream told me to remember it. Dreams can be tricky like that, can't they? Anyway, I'm going to put it in the cairn on top of the mountain."

Hard to say how much of this he's getting, how much he thinks you're an incoherent nut-job, but you've both followed unconventional paths in life, so some of it should find resonance.

"You mean... like a prayer or something? Or an offering to the gods?"

Okay, give him his due, this self-styled guru, he's close enough with that.

"Sure. An offering. To what or to whom I can't say. To what the ancients called 'divine' maybe, I mean before the time came when we started calling it anything else. Why that pebble? Well, there's nothing more real to a man than a pebble in his shoe, is there? So maybe I'm owning my reality, and in doing so offering my self up for sacrifice. And then again maybe I'm just trying to link the two ends of my life, see if I can make a circle out of my time on earth, shake a bit more of the puzzle from it."

Again, you can't tell how much of this he's grasped, nor how much of it you really understand yourself. It's just spilled out, like words sometimes do, driven by a force under their own steam, and like dreams, meaningful in themselves at the time of their utterance. He hands the pebble back, nestling it in both palms, like an egg, respectful of its fragility.

"Ever see her again?" he asks.

"Who?"

"The girl?"

"Ah, no... I'm pretty sure she's dead, Marcus. Long time ago."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because only if she was a ghost could she have haunted me all my life the way she has, maybe even from a time before I was born, and throughout all my lives. She's what makes me tick, she's the key to everything." You hold up the key you once fished out of the sea, at a time when you were on the threshold of your own manhood. "This key, actually. And the thing with keys I've realised is that although they open plenty of doors, others... well, they just lock you in.

There's a flicker in him then, something at the thought of being locked in, and since you're an experienced counsellor, you're

already half way to the story of his life: you cannot find solace even in isolation whilst still a slave to another man, and especially not while telling lies to feed his ego.

"I'd deem it a great honour, Chris, if you'd let me carry you up the hill tomorrow."

"Carry me?"

"Well, obviously not *me*, man. My horse."

"Ah, interesting proposition. I've never ridden a horse."

"Oh, you'll soon get the hang. I'll lead her by the rein, you ride. Let my horse carry you up the hill."

And you're thinking, that's got to be the weirdest thing you've ever heard, being carried up the hill on a white horse, led by a dread-locked hippy in biblical robes. And therefore of course... perfect.

So you nod, tell him thanks, then you describe to him a room of sleeping men, all armed with swords, and a maiden asleep at their centre, a horn on one side of her, a sword on the other, and you tell him he has a choice, the horn or the sword, to wake the maiden, and if he can wake her she's his to cherish for ever. So what would he choose?

He thinks a while, and then he says,"Well, it's kind of you man, but that's a false choice. I mean like who are you to say I get to cherish the girl, no offence, and no point in it anyway unless she's for cherishing me right back. And maybe the right thing to do is let the poor girl sleep on, tie a knot in your dick and she'll wake up when she's ready."

"But what if she's in trouble, Marcus? What if she can't wake up? What if she's a prisoner? What if she's actually a part of you, and in releasing her, you set your own self free."

"Well okay, so take the sword and cut the head off every man first, quietly like, because they're a part of you too, and most likely the various faces of your own ego. Then she'll wake up. And the more of them you kill first, the wider awake she'll be and the more likely to you are to get away with it."

"Yes, yes, that's how I interpret it."

"So... she awake in you, man?"

"Pretty much."

"Still fighting that ego though."

"Some."

He nods. "Aren't we all? Word of advice though, honestly, this

ain't the place to go leaving an offering like that. So you take your pebble home and you give it to someone who loves you. Don't leave it here, man. Like I said, nothing grows here any more except what sucks your blood and 'appen-times poisons it. Most likely it would just just kill your dreams."

So you look at Marcus and you know he's right. And sure, even though you've driven all this way with this one purpose in mind, you also know Quixotic quests are prone to interpretation and change at a moment's notice when a chance reading of the runes demands it. So if it wasn't the pebble that brought you here, then what was it?

And don't go on about photographing bothies again.

Was it Marcus perhaps? Meeting Marcus? Because when you look at him you see a version of yourself, the way you might have turned out had you not met Jen and got yourself into the business of mending minds. All those tendencies would have grown out of you in dreads and dope, like a version of yourself who never left here in '87, took root instead amid the beauty and the sterile loneliness of this place and of your own self.

An alternate self?

Yes, you feel it now. Skaravaig's no longer the idyll it was when you were twenty six, and maybe it never was an idyll, at least not beyond this thing in your head and the presence of Jen and the fact your eye saw something in the land that day that's no longer here now.

"And my advice to you, Marcus, is don't die in this place. Get off the island. Go ride that fine horse of yours all the way to India."

"And I thank you, man. But it's not my horse, and everything I am is owned by another man. Anyway it's too hot out east for a guy wearing a coat like this, wouldn't you say?"

Meaning what? that like most of us he's mainly bullshit and dead wood, and lacks the courage to live the authentic life, or even to seek it in case he's found wanting. The difference between him and most, is that he knows it. You too, you're thinking. You're mostly dead wood, and you know it. Jen knew it too, burned all of that off herself before she was thirty. Some people are like that. Sure, she likely got herself killed, but went out in glory anyway, as perfect a soul as she could ever be. No need for a long life, a long road to discovering perfection when you're already there.

He was right too, about that pebble. This is no place to leave it.

But you'll be going up the mountain in the morning anyway, something else you realise you'd like to leave up there, something you've been carrying around for too long and you don't mind if the sterility of Skaravaig, of the past, kills it stone dead.

How to bring things full circle? Maybe you just plant a seed, Chris.

Chapter Thirty One

Sure, you're starting to remember now...

As you sit here by the fire with your glass of Old Fettlecairn, there's a growing lucidity to the awareness of your various returns to the Inn at the Edge of Light. The soft, shy contours of your dreams are beginning to harden into a more fixed – albeit entirely alternate – reality. The fire has a radiant warmth to it that moves across your face in waves, and the glass has a smooth, cool hardness under your fingertips as you turn it in the amber light. There's a spontaneity, too, in the conversations going on all around you, and so much so you swear you cannot possibly be making any of this up.

It's as if the dream is beginning to trust you with the details of your life, trust you will not allow them to contaminate or distort your being here, all the more as you discount them. So it is, they leak back across the threshold as you sit here pretty much as you would in waking life, with an awareness of your self stretching back a long, long way. You're also aware, of course, the dream could be making up certain details, as dreams do, having you believe in them as absolute truths, like a pebble in your shoe, a pebble that never existed, though you swear you carried it in your pocket your whole life without knowing why.

Carried what, Chris?

That pebble, dammit!

Yes, yes, you know that for all your lucidity in this place, the dream is still selective in what it allows you to recall, and what you accept as the truth. You know there's more, but it's like people you've met and can no longer remember their names, though you know they were once important to you. And this trimmed down version of your self sitting here, ruminating, is of a man still caught up in the enigma of his life, the most potent symbols of which are the key and the ticking watch, and a woman looking at you, smiling, but distant, and through no fault of her own.

All you have to do is set down the watch and the key, and go take her hand, present her with the pebble, with the sheer hard reality that's you. It's not like she's asleep or anything, not surrounded by a sleeping army.

That's all there is to it.

All obstacles are self-inflicted.

The lock you see, Chris, and the puzzle of time are both illusions. Our minds invent them; they make the locks unlockable, and the sense of time forever running out, running down, running away from us, so we can escape neither of them. The mind is like the dream, convincing us of their reality, their inevitability, their absolute inscrutability to the very end of our days. Sure... which is why there's a couple of pocket-watches buried deep, and for all time in the cairn on top of that big hill on the isle of Skaravaig, and a key tossed into the sea from whence it came, and a pebble still in your pocket, a pebble for that long, long journey home.

Are you remembering this right? Or is the dream making it up, making you remember it as right?

Hell, who knows?

The landlord rings last orders, which you suppose is telling you you're not dead yet, and since all things here are symbolic, as well as pertaining to a life of their own, it's telling you perhaps to shape up and in so doing abandon the quest. Thus the hero comes full circle, discovers the end of his journey is actually right back where he started. You can learn that by taking a thousand mile round trip, or you can just shift your mind a bit and make it so without taking as much as a single step.

You check the number on your room-key. 47 it says, and you remember from past visits, that the number most likely relates to your age, not to the room, that the room is always the same, unless you ask for a change. But the puzzling thing about that is, you can remember way past your forty seven years. You're sure your keys have had numbers well into the sixties and the seventies before now. But if that's true, have you asked for a different room at some point, come back in time and, if you have, how come you can remember these details from another life: an America lost to armed militia, to the ruin of a multi-factioned civil war that was a generation in the building, to a Middle East contaminated by the exchange of tactical nuclear missiles and the deaths of millions, and then to a curiously nostalgic England of useless Kevlar Anderson shelters all ordered off eBay, and vegetable patches like some grotesque homage to the Second World War, and its every bitter privation.

Where does forty seven put you exactly? In your life, I mean. What was significant about that year?

Was it Vienna? That conference dinner, seemingly unimportant at the time, but having taken on a greater significance since? Was it Igor Kadinsky, dominating the table, holding all in thrall, and you, your leg brushed by the pointy toes of that quiet Bohemian woman in his shadow, and then her asking your name, and what do you think, and you blushing at the sense of your own inadequacy and her jaw-dropping beauty? You smile defensively, shrugging, unable to admit you understand nothing, and even at the age of forty seven not realising you know as much as anyone else around that table anyway, including the great Kadinsky himself, that you're just as important, and if only you could clear your head and get out a string of words, you'd really be worth listening to.

That's what she was telling you, Chris.

So come on!

But wait, does all that really happen? Well sure, Vienna anyway, that seems pretty much a fact. As for the wars and things, do they just seem inevitable from the way the news media plays upon our vulnerabilities, I mean, that it's precisely because nobody wants another war, a war becomes inevitable?

Ah, look! The number's changed now. You're fifty five already. That'll be the kids leaving home, and your wife looking at you suddenly as if you were a stranger, which you suppose you are, both to her and to yourself. Then you're twenty six, and you're meeting the girl you're going to spend the rest of your life thinking about.

Jen. Her name was Jen.

No, you wouldn't be so stupid as to change rooms. You can, you're pretty sure you can, but that doesn't mean you should, not without knowing the rules. That way you just get lost in the hedonistic pursuit of a pleasurable life, a life without pain and suffering, and there's no such thing. Which means either the dream's making up much more of this than you're supposing, or it's leaking through from other versions of your life, which means in turn you're gaining a perspective on your life, here by the fire at the Inn at the edge of light, night after night, and that what life is is a kind of growing up or a growing *into* something you have the potential to be, but only if you don't try too hard to define it, if you resist the siren short cuts luring you to your doom, and you don't go testing every lock and checking your watch every five damned minutes.

Sound like anyone we know?

You have a soul, Chris and all it needs is light and air and the sound of running water. You must have snapped it a thousand times with that old OM10, remember? You just didn't see it. Not really.

Now that's all well and good, remembering it in here and it feels like quite the revelation, doesn't it? But pretty soon you'll be waking back somewhere into the tumult of your life, and the question is, will you be remembering any of this?

Well, will you?

Chapter Thirty Two

"No, the question, Chris, is more like this: what happens when we die? I mean... where do we go?"

Charlie. Remember that time?

You've just spent the entire afternoon making love – except of course, it was never like making love with Charlie. It was more a form of mortal combat, and now you're in her kitchen while she pours out the first of many glasses of cheap red wine. You can barely keep your eyes open because sex always does that to you, and right now you could sleep for a week.

This is no time for philosophising.

She's invited friends round and they'll be arriving any minute. You're jealous of the guys who'll be coming and who seem easier with her than you are, and you want to seem interesting to her, eager to please and older than you are, because she's nearly forty now and you've some catching up to do. She's always blunt when it comes to questions of philosophy. Remember that? The spiritual too, the afterlife and that kind of thing, seeing it as kind-of literal, while you don't. Indeed you've concluded everything on that level's more nuanced, more subtle than what the books say, and never what you expect it to be.

"I don't know, Charlie. Nobody knows for sure and if they say they do, they're lying."

The Greeks had a fair old stab at it, and you reckon there's much to be learned on that subject from their myths of the underworld. You're studying all that guff just now as part of your course and it's damned near incomprehensible, like anything can be used as a metaphor for anything else, so nothing means anything. Or perhaps the life-after is purely personal, and more a reflection of your own expectations, and you go on like that until such a time as you dissolve back into pure awareness. And myths change. It's for every generation to invent its own, except we've forgotten how, and more importantly *why*.

Time? You're sure time drops out of the equation somewhere, which means a part of you's already sitting across the other side of the veil, and again, since you need time to gauge any kind of development towards anything, including spiritual wholeness, there's none of us who aren't already enlightened. It’s just that

we've forgotten. Either that or the answer's more obvious and prosaic, and we're just biological beings navigating a linear space-time, and when we die there's nothing, and both the living and the dreaming stops and everything else is just wishful thinking.

So how come your instincts are telling you one thing and the facts another? And is it better to go with instinct or fact? And then again, if you've dreamed something ahead of time, like you often do, does that not also suggest, at least to you, you're already existing, in some form, in a place beyond space and time, at the same time... as being alive? So how can you ever be dead, if a part of you is always capable seeing beyond it?

But you can't tell her any of that. It's too complicated. Hell, you can't even phrase the question accurately, let alone answer it.

While you talk, the TV is full of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the usual jingoistic rags are gagging for war, so this must be what? '1990? Is that right? Tens of thousands of young men are going to die, most of them children still, and beyond their own families, no one will ever know their names, or care. And maybe that's why she's asking this particular question right now, about death, also why it'll be the theme for the evening's soiree with her post-modern friends. The coming of war.

But you? In all honesty – and you are at least learning to be honest with yourself now – you're excited by the build up. It fills the air. The cause is just. Let's just kill the bastards! But then again you also know war is human beings burned to a crisp and left hanging like scarecrows; it's children nailed to doors, disembowelled and left to die, it's women raped and dismembered, and men buggered with bayonets, and then a generation left to deal with the shock of what we did. It is every horror imaginable let loose, and quite a few besides, a frenzy of killing, and it's giving you a hard-on, and you're examining that, ashamed, then examining your shame.

All you want to do is go to sleep and find equilibrium in your dreams. Your dreams will put you right. They'll take this foetid gas of war and burn it off, compost it into something more wholesome. Life, being, this whole human thing... it's infinitely more complicated than we can tell from just the surface ripples. You have to look under the stones, see what crawls out. And even as you begin to formulate an opinion on it, it shape-shifts into something else.

Meanwhile you're in the corner of the kitchen, like you always are at parties and no one's talking to you, but you're listening, and you're hearing all these stupid kids quoting Marx as if he had all the answers, these the same kids who ran around setting off fire alarms and making smoke with extinguishers while you were trying to cram differential equations for your HND. But worse than all of that you're aware Charlie's been flirting with this guy for most of the night, which she says is fine because yours isn't that kind of relationship, so you've learned to let it go, and anyway you're several glasses of wine gone by now, and drifting off into a kind of hypnogogic state with all these shrill voices like cicadas in the background. And then, of a sudden, you have a vision of a white room with a bay window and this stunning view of the sea, and a woman's hand brushes your face.

"Woa!"

You're sure you're not that drunk, but the vision induces a kind of vertigo and you flop down on a sofa.

"You all right, Chris?"

"Hmm?"

It's one of the girls from the photo-shoot, except it isn't, not at first. At first it's someone else, and she comes with a scent of sandalwood, and though these things have happened to you before, it doesn't make them any less startling. And, okay, *then* it's the girl from the photo-shoot, come to make a kind of sense of it and to blur the vision back into reality for you.

"Can I get you another drink?" she asks.

You don't want another drink. You've had plenty already, but you don't want to seem unfriendly and no one else is talking to you, so you nod, and you both finish the evening on the sofa, passed out into one another, while for all you know Charlie and this other guy are working the bedsprings upstairs. You wake in the small hours, embarrassed to find yourself with your head pressed against her bosom, dribbling into her blouse.

You apologise, she shrugs it off. "It's not a problem, Chris." Then she's running her hand through your hair, and her body's telling you she wants more. And sure, you could do with more than this yourself, or at least the reassurance that there *is* more, considerably more, but that has to be for the future. As for right now, sex isn't going to do it for you, so you let yourself out into the amber overcast of a night in the city with nothing but her phone number, and

you make your way back to the hovel you're renting, when what you really want to do is go back home to the little room you slept in as a boy, and wake up back in the early part of the sixties, never having had to go to school, a time when the world was still golden and fresh as dawn and the meadows wide and sweet-smelling, a time before you had to admit to yourself you'd failed and that nothing was ever going to be right or clean and pure again.

How do you recapture that, Chris?

For sure it's just a state of mind?

The city lights have taken the night, extinguished the stars, rendered the whole view of heaven irrelevant. Meanwhile the city's creeping, consuming more and more of your reality, turning it into this hideous machine with a tin face distorted into a permanent sneer, laughing at anyone who still dares to dream. And maybe it's true, you dreamed that thing about the white room by the sea, and the unseen hand, and the scent of sandalwood, and that strange rush of love, and maybe a bit of it came leaking through just then, or maybe it was something else, a glimpse of another life... except the feeling was exquisite and looking about you now it's hard to imagine anything so sweet being part of reality at all.

Reality is something else, you see? Reality is loss and suffering, and always this ache for a thing just out of view, a thing you can never have, even if you could say what it was exactly. And besides that it's hypodermics and gas-caps of despair in the back alleys, and the usual choke of diesel fumes down the Oxford Road. And there are all these poor bastards drowning in it, and you've said you'll help them, but how can you do that when you're drowning in it yourself?

Is it always going to be this way, Chris?

She had a nice skin, that girl. Quite dark. Something Pre-Raphaelite about her too. Charlie certainly has an eye for that sort of thing, doesn't she? Maybe it's not a good idea that you have her number because, sure as Hell when you sober up, you're not going to remember anything about it, or even what she looked like. But does it matter. I mean really? And anyway, it seems you and Charlie's days are numbered.

So call her, Chris.

It's a stage of life, and you need to get it done.

Chapter Thirty Three

The landlord tips you the wink, gestures over to your table, and you see her sitting there: Pre-Raphaelite woman, a dark stain of drool on her bosom and it strikes you that you know her... only you don't know at what point in your life you're dreaming all this from, if you've only just met her or you're reminiscing from way out front somewhere.

And you don't know how much of what you're remembering is true, or if it's just something the dream is making you believe, and right now it's telling you you were married to her for twenty years, though she only looked as good as this for the first five, and then the kids came along, stretched her body this way and that on account of it.

As for you? All your kids wanted from you was money. Then they learned they'd only to flash their tits at guys and money came flooding in from other sources, more than you could have afforded anyway. Was that your fault? Did they learn their cynicism, their manipulative ways from you? You'll need to think about that one, but for now you take up your drink and you sit down with her.

"We were both lonely," she explains.

You note the air of resignation, something soft, magnanimous about her.

"Yes. Yes, we were."

She's wearing a trench-coat, belted snug around her waist, nothing underneath, because you remember that's the way she used to turn up for the photo-shoot, so the elastic-dug lines of her bra straps and panties would already have faded. If Charlie wanted her wearing anything, Charlie would provide it from her bottomless treasure-chest of Victoriana. As for the rest, it was just the body we needed, a good body, potent, sexual... stunningly nude.

"Still, twenty years was pretty good going," she says.

"True. Some don't make five."

Oh, come on! Is there much point in this?

What?

She's just a thought-form, Chris, spun from your memories and your own understanding of this relationship, so she'll tell you anything you want to hear, do anything you want her to do. But what you want most of all is just to sit with her, and understand

how that makes you feel, explore the journey of your time with this woman, try to understand where it went wrong, because you're no longer together, and your kids don't want to know you any more, either of you. But that wasn't your fault, was it? You both did your best, then offered them up to the tide of the world, which promptly turned them both into vain imbeciles.

And you resent that, don't you? Not them, not your kids, for they were young and couldn't help it and this thing came at them from the inside, sucked their brains out through their phones, and there wasn't a damned thing you could do to protect them, to prevent them joining the world as it is, one big seething neurosis.

You thought you were arming yourself against it, didn't you? But psychotherapy's like taking a slingshot to a barking dog, and then steaming around the corner comes a charging bull elephant. You really didn't stand a chance, not for your kids or any single one of your clients. The world is schizophrenic, hears voices all the time and they're stupid and they mean nothing, but we think they do, and we do exactly what they tell us.

That's the thing, you see? You're no longer getting lost in yourself so much these days. You're aware of your self, observant of the weather of your emotions, the play of your thoughts. And the more aware of the self we become, the less we identify with the emotions, and the more the self grows. And the world up top is alien to it, Chris. The soul is not welcome up there. This is more its natural environment. So find a way to grow some soul up there, Chris, before the landlord calls last orders on you.

That's the key to living a good life!

"You should have this back," she says, then takes a pebble from her pocket, hands it over. "I'm not the one who should have it. We were okay for a short time, you and me, and by the time we weren't the kids came along and held us together for a bit longer. And then they left, and we were done."

It's some other part of you that's having her say this. You don't know if she really sees and feels it that way, if there's some wisdom in it, or you're trying to mop up some guilt that might even be decades old.

You don't remember making her a gift of the pebble. Indeed it seems ridiculous as it's not the sort of thing she would understand. It would only ever have been a pebble to her.

Her form flickers in the firelight, becomes transparent for a

moment. You're losing her. You take a breath, as much as you can in this place and you try to breathe her back, but you're distracted by a voice at your elbow, and you turn to find old Smollet standing there, looking like a cadaver, all the blood drained from him, his fingers stained by a mixture of nicotine and printer's ink.

"Smollet?"

"Sorry for the way I treated you, lad."

Another thought-form, then. Such nights as this are confusing, occasionally tiresome. These are not old ghosts. Smollet always looked like death.

"Well, you always did treat me appallingly, you old bastard."

You note however, there's no trace of resentment in you, even as you curse him. The world seemed less mature in those days, the days of drawing-boards and film cameras. And managers were rude as a matter of course, yet for all of their ignorance, they retained an aura, and you respected them in spite of your self, knowing that one day you could stand in their shoes. Except, you never wanted that, did you, Chris? You never wanted to be like him.

"It's just how it was, in those days," he tells you, or rather you tell yourself, through him.

"Sure, that's how I remember it too. No hard feelings though."

"That's very gracious of you, lad."

What is this? Are we to make peace with everyone who's rubbed us up the wrong way? You hope not, or it might take a while and you're sure the dream has more pressing business than this. You note, however, a rising frustration. You want him to go, because you're losing Pre-Raphaelite woman. But you have no control here. The dream shows you what you need to see, arouses in you what you need to feel.

Observe it, Chris. Think critically.

She's gone now. Just the pebble on the table, a pebble from the wind-raked sands of the Mouth of Hell.

Porth Neigwl.

A pebble for the journey home.

Hell.

The Devil? Mephistopheles.

The detail, Chris. It's all in the detail!

"Can I get you a drink, Mr Smollet?"

"Nah, you're all right, lad. Ten o'clock, see?"

He has a copy of the Sun tucked under his arm, shuffles off to

the gents for a dump and a gawp at page three, and you wonder about that. But while you're wondering you go sit at the bar, ask the landlord for another glass, and he tops you up.

"On the tab, sir?"

"Yes... on the tab."

He reads your mind, your mood, offers up a sympathetic aside. "Something divine about it, sir. Don't you think?"

"Divine?"

"The female form, in the first flush of youth, the first bud of womanhood."

"Oh, that page three thing? Yes. But is it not merely a man's base instinct that makes it so?"

"Depends, sir, on whether the feeling rises to the heart, or sinks to the loins."

"Ah... good point."

He's a master at telling you the obvious. It's just that most of us can't see what's obvious, including you. And sure, it was always the heart for you, wasn't it, Chris? Jen, Charlie, all those Pre-Raphaelite women, and the woman in the blue dress...

One other... one other. Who was it, dammit? Sandalwood. White room. Bay-windows looking out upon the sea! The North Sea. Sunrises, and a story about a castle and a sleeping girl...

The dream teases you with the name, but withholds it. You take a sip, wait for the magic. The room shimmers a bit, but steadies again, the old crusties spin the dartboard, beckon you over, but you're not in the mood for another game tonight.

The game has no meaning, meaning the world up top has no meaning either. You're not entirely powerless, you can work things so there's a little less suffering for others, and it's right that you should, but ultimately the tides of the Zeitgeist are stronger than you are, so there are times when it will all fall apart and the suffering will be immense. Got to move with the tides Chris.

Move with the tides.

Oh and by the way: Wake up! Because...

Chapter Thirty Four

Because,... there's a Rozzer tapping on the window of the van. He's got up like a cyborg and scares the crap out of you, like you've woken into the midst of an episode of Doctor Who. Remember Doctor Who? Do they still call them Rozzers, by the way? You used to call them that in the seventies, the days when they dressed smart and there were plenty of them, and still identifiably human, unlike this specimen now.

You can't see his eyes through his one way visor, and he speaks to you through a full-faced helmet, a mask in other words, his tone modified by the software to something just short of robotic. Rozzer's used to be able to manage this without technology, so it's about ID: hiding theirs while they enquire into yours.

You scan the glyph on his arm-band. He doesn't like that but you're within your rights. There are so many wandering about dressed like Rozzers these days who aren't, and not enough real Rozzers to stop them. In olden times they would have been called Highwaymen.

Your scan comes back with rank, serial number and surname only. This is normal. You decline his iris scan in return because you've read the lasers they're using are of cheap manufacture and over-bright, occasionally harmful. You've still a long way to drive and you don't want to risk spark-eye, so he takes a picture of your face instead, but the machine doesn't recognise you because you've no social media profile to speak of. You offer him your phone for id, and he hooks it up, sucks the guts out of it.

Coming from?

Skaravaig.

Going to?

The North.

Then why are you southbound?

Got to head south through Scotland to get to the north of England, officer.

Are you giving me attitude?

No, officer.

Your phone contains an address, but nothing else. No list of phone contacts or browsing history. He queries that. You do not query his interest in your phone contacts. You don't need to.

Sure, your phone contains nothing of any interest – just the legal minimum; haven't held a passport in decades; your citizen score's negligible, this on account of your resistance to playing the game – your lack of social media presence again, also your largely retired status. This may be why he's coming over a little aggressive, thinking you're an unaffiliated nobody. We are none of us anybody of course, but it would be unwise to point this out to one as unconscious as he, or he might take it personally and think you're giving him "attitude". Besides, it's common for the older generation to end their days in camper-vans, to pass away, alone in lay-bys like this. It incurs a cost to the local councils – cleaning up I mean – but it's at least the one problem in life that need not concern us, personally.

Sure, maybe you should join the grey cohorts yourself, Chris. But the road is no place to be – Jen was wrong about that, plus the kind of transport you can afford's going to be so unreliable it would drive you nuts.

He tells you to move on, that the lay-by you're in is known as a nuisance for public sex. Voice modifier or not, you know he's lying. Even nowadays public sex in broad daylight is considered by the coarsest among us as... well... rather coarse.

You tell him the van's flat, has been for days, that you're charging up, but this doesn't wash.

He tells you he'll be back in an hour and if you're still there you'll be given a ticket for obstructing the highway, or something, even though you're not exactly on it. Then he asks again if he detects an "attitude" so you grovel, apologise, tell him you'll be gone.

You've just enough juice to make the border, but suspect the Rozzers there are unlikely to be any more friendly. Indeed they're always jumpy around the borders, terrified of aliens, or whoever else has been designated the "other". But there must have been an incident for them to be checking lone campers in the wilds. The precise nature of this is of no interest to you – there's always an incident of some kind to justify all manner of authoritarian excess. The history books are clear on that, but you never thought you'd live to experience it in your own country, your own time.

In England.

You feel humiliated, and that's interesting, that you had to get down on your belly and grovel to someone likely half your IQ. So

you sit a while, observing your humiliation, watching it vomit up from deep inside of you, then swirl it around a bit and spit it out. Only when you've returned to a state of magnanimity do you climb down and pack away the solar array. Was that it? Did the Rozzer not like you collecting sunshine? Sure, anything that can be taken for free has to be suspect, but there's not a lot you can do to tax sunshine... or the air we breathe.

There's a village ahead. There might once have been a farm, with eggs for breakfast, but they're mostly gone now, farms, a nation of fallow land, too expensive to work, with every grain of pulse and rice, every synthetic joint of meat, every vegetable coming from God knows where.

Odd how easily you adapt, isn't it, Chris? No matter how extraordinary the developments, people absorb them, seek a fresh equilibrium in this, the new normal. Thus dystopia never actually arrives, always fails for lack of rejection. A universal oppression is omnipresent, your advancing years your only defence, this pretence of harmlessness.

Do we ignore it, Chris? We know it makes no difference to the growth of the soul. We can still find a monastic cave somewhere to crawl into and meditate away the remaining days until last orders. *Last orders?* But what of others? Can we really stand by when circumstances are such that the fertile ground is denied them as well, that indeed the way of life forced upon them is the opposite of what is good? But it's the Zeitgeist, Chris. You were dreaming about this, remember? No, not last night, but sometime or other, maybe... and sure we all contribute to the Zeitgeist but there's only so much a single mind can do.

These are big questions, and they have no answers.

You're missing Sophia of course, but you've told yourself you're struggling to settle into that way of life, and with a woman whose mind is turned so completely away from the world now. She spends her days foraging for seaweed at the edge of England, makes soap with it, trades home grown tomatoes and onions for smoked kippers in that grey little village by the sea. And of an evening, she distils her introverted thoughts into blank verse poems written on her home-made mushroom paper. Then she seals them in bottles and leaves them out on the rocks by the sea for the tide to take, as if for the planet itself to ruminate upon them and let her know via her dreams, you suppose, what it thinks.

"But does it ever answer, Sophia?"

"Sometimes."

"And what does it say?"

"Same as always. Persistence and good intentions."

"Your encounters at the Inn at the Edge of Light tell you that?"

"Not in words so much. More often it's in the tone of feeling when I wake. Sometimes when I meditate the words just come."

"Persistence and good intentions? It's not a bad mantra. I wish I knew what my feelings told me."

"But you already do. You're all closed up, still locked in love with a girl who died thirty years ago. It's left you speechless with grief. Just open your mouth now and then, Chris. Doesn't matter what noises come out. People will listen. I will listen."

"It's not that, Sophia. Oh, I know the overwhelming temptation has always been to escape life's vicissitudes... escape into dreams, into stories of other worlds, escape into the fantasy of computerised virtuality... but,..."

"But?"

"I know we're supposed to make sense of it, to subdue the shadows that are bent on killing us... yet a hundred years of analysis, and things are only getting worse... and now... it just seems so hopeless."

"Maybe,... for the world it is. But what about you, Chris?"

"I remember you wrote..."

"Forget what I wrote."

"In the dreaming... of the Inn at the Edge of Light, I'm always given the same room... I remember that much at least. But what if I asked for another? A different room."

"Then you'd destroy the very thing in you that is human."

"Which is?"

"Your vulnerability of course. We mostly think of it as a curse. But truly it's the only thing that puts us above the Gods. It's why the gods and everything else that's inside of us is bent on streaming out into life. And that's fine. I understand that, but if they're not to overwhelm our dreams, our devils, we must cooperate, negotiate... or they'll storm out like berserkers and overwhelm us. And then they'll go on to destroy the world."

"Negotiate?"

"Through our myths. We've always dealt with them that way, except now we've forgotten how to make myths, how to renew them. And that's why we're in the state we're in."

If only I could understand this. She'll likely end her days in that place, Sophia Klein, once analyst to kings and princes, now the mad-woman who leaves bottles of poetry for the ebb-tide. She falls to a nobody, going nowhere, and in doing so regains the whole of her life, and her death. Like Jen did that time, on the hippy trail to India.

Chapter Thirty Five

"I'll put it on the tab then, shall I, sir?"

"On the tab, yes. Thanks."

You're at the bar, a glass of Old Fettlecairn at your elbow. The landlord slides your key across and you take it up, begin tapping it lightly against the wood. It has a number, but you know you're older than that by now so you suspect, though you'll be waking into tomorrow as normal, it's already well into your past, and you're dreaming now from a point at which you already have a line in time ahead of you – and no idea how any of it worked out.

Sophia Klein. That's all you remember.

You and Sophia Klein.

It could be you're lovers now. You have a feeling this is true, and not simply a desire on your part, though how the hell that came, or is yet to come about, you can't imagine. And if it has, then well done, because she's a hell of a woman and can teach you a lot. Or maybe you blew it, and everything you're imagining that might have been between you, you've already lost.

Anyway, what would a woman like that see in a guy like you?

Sophia? Yes... she has this theory about dreaming, you know? that it might be a gateway to other lines in time, and maybe that's why when you're in the dream, you're usually denied all memory of where you're up to in your life, or what you're up to, or how it's all going, because if you could, you'd be jumping about all over the place, avoiding this or that outcome - or at least avoiding your awareness of it. Got an exam in the morning you know is going to go badly? So skip back a bit spend more time revising. Already bombed the exam? Skip back and take it again.

It's your awareness of this that's the thing you can most assuredly say is who you are. The rest is just your thoughts, your memories, and the emotions that arise. Which all kind of suggests your life is infinitely more than just the bits and bobs, otherwise why be aware of them? Or maybe that's all some people are, just the bits and bobs of their life, and they've never experienced a sincere serious moment of self awareness at all.

Such are the details, Chris?

Stuff spewing from the mouth of Hell.

You? You're wondering if you've already lived every possible

version of your life and if your awareness covers all of that as well, all those other thoughts and memories and feelings, and the emotions that arise, and though it's possible to switch tracks, to flip back to '87 and be with Jen again, experience all that again, there's no point because a version of you is already there in the thick of it, so to speak, the pair of you giving way to your natural urges and making love that night in the bothy instead of blathering on about philosophy like a couple of freaks.

You want to be that version, Chris? Sure, I know, but there's no point, because you already are that version. You just don't remember it, like you won't remember any of this when you wake up. And if there are lessons to be learned from any of that, you're learning them now, so there's no need to go back and try them out.

You take a big sip, set the glass down and the landlord tops you up at once. Something in his eye suggests you're close to a revelation tonight and all you have to do is get yourself blind drunk to see it. But that's what landlords do, and you're not sure you can really trust him because what he pedals is possibilities, which are just the ghosts of details that might yet be. If they're the right ones or not is hardly his concern. Nor are you likely to carry this eureka through into the waking light of day anyway, other than as an ache in your gut.

So, no, you do not want another room.

Stick with it. See it out, Chris. Sure, you've a feeling life up top is far from perfect and your future's more uncertain than it's ever been, but you're also seeing there's no path you can choose that would avoid any of that, or at least not simply lead you to a different version of the same thing.

Vulnerability?

Where are you getting that word from? You don’t know, but it means something to you right now. You have an expiry date, Chris. It lends a certain focus to your life, your thoughts, a thing not possessed by the immortals, and it’s only in this one crucial fact the gods envy us.

Our ability to focus.

Focus, Chris, for time is always against us.

You set the key down, take up your glass, resist it, set it down with a bump, begin to tap the rim with your finger so your wedding-ring raises a bright, rhythmic tinkle. Then a sickly kind of truth hits you and look up at the landlord, who's smiling.

"There's no point to any of it is there?" you tell him.

"Not as such, sir, no."

"It's all... an illusion of unavoidable circumstance. Detail. Bits and bobs. Randomness. A remarkable, epic farce. The architect of material reality is old Nick himself."

"True, sir. Remarkable. Epic. Old Nick's your man all right!"

"No... no. Wait. It's not a farce."

"Not at all, sir, no."

"It just is what it is, but what it is, isn't what we think, and for sure we'll never find what we're searching for in amongst any of its details."

"Absolutely not, sir. We won't. You're right there."

"And it's not like it's hidden is it? I mean, what we're looking for. It's hiding in plain sight. And when we realise it, everything else is irrelevant. And jumping about in time... that would just be like changing the scenery."

You look at him, aware of him repeating, affirming even your contradictory swings. Is he just another thought-form then? You'd assumed he was more than that, for surely he's helped you out before? passed on the odd gem of wisdom. Why not now?

Perhaps because you do not ask him, Chris?

He reads your mind, like they sometimes do here. "No, actually, if you don't mind my saying so, I think you're wrong there, sir."

"Oh? Which part?"

"You're assuming all lines in time exist. That your soul is so old you've already tried every permutation possible."

"And I haven't?"

"Not at all. Perhaps we need to go back and create them. But you're right in the sense that we'd need a good reason for doing that, otherwise we're just jumping about all over the place, avoiding those things we don't like. An awareness of that power, of that secret door... if you weren't ready for it... well it would destroy you, dissolve you into a sea of limitless choices. You'd need to have gained a very wise perspective on life before you tried that. And perhaps it's simply not in our gift."

"Yes... but wait... you're saying it's possible a part of me never walked to India with Jen?"

"Oh, I couldn't say for sure, sir. You may have done. Or you may have got no further than the Yorkshire dales, then married the girl before the year was out and raised a family, and lived happily ever

after. But where would be the fun in that?"

"Well, in my experience the course of true love and marriage – marriage in particular – never does run smoothly. So I dare say a life with Jen wouldn't have turned out as expected. But remembering her the way I do, it would have been one hell of a ride. Okay... so, I get it. The things we avoid doing sometimes provide the most potential for growth. I think I was an analyst or a counsellor or something – maybe I still am – and I suspect I've told people that a thousand times."

"I suspect you have sir."

"But there's also a danger, that some other part of me chose this life, so I'd be better seeing it out to the end, maybe taking stock sometime later, like after you've rung last orders on me... deciding then which room I'd prefer, whereabouts in my life I'd think it prudent to jump back to and start a goddamned revolution. Or just walk all the way to India, with Jen. Or wind up in the Dales with her, marry her and raise those kids, and look back at some point in awe and wonder at the million ways just knowing her changed me for the better."

"I'm sure that would be very wise, sir."

"But what's to stop me making the same choices, the same mistakes, over and over? Who's to say if I get another chance with Jen, another night in that bothy, I won't pass up on the chance?"

"Ordinarily that tends to be what happens, sir. But once you've travelled sufficiently, found your way to the inn, well... I hope you'll agree, there's always a welcome, and helping hand here, always someone with a story, or just the right amount of company to set you on the right path. And also..."

"Also?"

"Who's to say you weren't right first time around. That the person who made the crucial choice in your life that time was her... not you."

"Okay... I get that. So we're growing, in all sorts of directions, exploring paths through various lives. And the choices of others in relation to us have as much impact on their path as on ours."

"About the size of it, sir, yes."

"Okay... wait... it's coming..."

"Sir?..."

"No point asking for the key to that other room until you've gained sufficient perspective in the life you're living. Then the one

life can feed through into the other, render it more potent..."

"I'd say that's very likely, sir. Now that would be something, wouldn't it?"

"But what's the reason for it all? Why is all of this so important? And why is it so... hidden?"

"Oh,... those are big questions. You'll have to ask up the big house about that. I'm just the keeper of the inn, you see?"

The big house? You went there once... remember? you went with a girl who might or might not have been Jen. Or is the dream just telling you that? Steady yourself, Chris. Take a gulp of whiskey, note how it stabilises you, turns up the wick of your lucidity. "Not everyone can get in there though, can they? I suspect you need an invitation."

"Quite right, sir. An invitation's the thing."

"And unwise to go trespassing."

"Oh, indeed. There would lie madness, sir. They would need to lay on a special reception for you, a way of seeing, if you like... or it would all just be meaningless, like the most topsy-turvy dream."

You thank him, take your glass out into the garden try to order your thoughts.

The soul is bound in time, at least from the perspective of a serial mortality. It has an age, through many lives. But not all possibilities have been explored. Some have, others not at all. Some of our potential remains virgin territory: things we've not done and regret not doing, things we've not dared to do, things the choices of others have prevented us from exploring. And if only you could remember any of this when you wake up topside, you might be some the wiser.

The sun is setting but the air is warm and golden like the dog days of summer, and you can see the windows of the big Austenesque house across the meadow all ablaze with it. You lean on the wall, gaze out, and you wonder. The waitress appears, collecting glasses from the tables. You remember she calls them cups. There's a symbolic link with the Tarot here but you hesitate to go there this time because the dream is getting complicated enough.

"Not thinking of making a run for it, are you, Chris?"

"I suspect you already know the answer to that. Anyway I thought I was John. Who the hell is Chris?"

"Oh, I suspect you're beginning to cotton on. Can I get you anything?"

"Yes, I need the woman in the blue dress. The Mediator. Except, she never explains anything, just sends me into all the places I fear to go. But there's a piece of me missing, and I think she could help me with that. Any chance you could help me find her?"

"That's easy, she's sitting over there."

"Ah."

Of course she is. She's sitting in the shade of an apple tree. The tree is in blossom, wrong season of course, wrong everything. But that's fine, it's symbolic after all and you don't need her to answer any questions. You just need her to grant a wish, and if memory serves you've yet to ask a single one.

She receives you like a queen, gestures so you might sit at her table, but instead you kneel. "Take me back to '85, like you once did before. And I don't mean literally, not to change rooms or anything. Send me into Barker's office. I need to ask him something.

Her eyes light up, as if you've hit upon the very thing. "Ah,... now you're talking, Chris!"

So she touches her fingertip to your forehead, and there you are. Beatrice is clickety clacking on her Silver Reed and smiling, nodding you towards the door. It's all stale fags and soft blue carpet. You still need to steel yourself for what you might find on the other side, but you've done this before, at least in your head and you learned something by it then. It's hoped you'll learn something more this time.

Barker is a small man in his fifties with an unfeasibly dark moustache and a poorly fitting hairpiece. He's sitting behind a big desk and a bank of telephones that keep ringing, and as one rings, he snatches up the receiver, barks some orders, then another one rings and he does the same again, the phones ringing faster and faster, until he's holding one in each hand and one tucked under his chin, and he's juggling them inexpertly so the lines are getting crossed and the cables shorter and shorter so he has to lower his head to the desk.

After a while he notices you and straightens up. "Well?"

"You're the top man around here, Mr. Barker," you tell him. "You're the only gaffer I ever truly feared. Never much liked you, to be honest, but at least I did respect you. All the ones that followed were no better than self-serving dickheads. That didn't make you a God in my eyes, but I always judged you a genuinely tough man, and a wise man, I mean to be running a place like this, and right

now I'm in need of some tough, wise counsel."

He untangles himself from his phones, buzzes through to Beatrice, tells her to hold all calls. "Sit down then. Out with it."

You sit.

"So?"

"It's about life, you see?"

"Oh that."

"I mean, how do we wake the world up, Mr Barker?"

"Wake it up to what, lad? Be specific."

"To itself, Mr Barker. So it can look at itself and be capable of a little self analysis, be more in control of itself, so it never falls for the false promises of cruel men ever again."

"Are you stupid or what?"

"Probably. But I'm listening."

"Do you think we know who all the cruel men are? If we did we could round them up, put them in a cage and shoot them, preferably before they've had a chance to breed, spare the world that way, eradicate all evil at a stroke. We might have done it centuries ago. Why didn't we, you ask? Well, it's not like we don't know who they are, is it? You can ask any bloody fool and they'll tell you. No, it's because we can't, and we can't because, sure, we might point a finger at so and so, spouting his lies, but he's just the latest incarnation, right? What you call evil, well, I hate to say this, lad but it's in me, and it's in you. We're all of us just plain stupid under the right conditions. So you can never eliminate stupidity. Stupid is what we are. You can't go back to a point in time and start a revolution against evil."

You're relieved by this because you've no idea how to achieve such a thing anyway, a revolution against evil, as he put it, but you're also dismayed because it doesn't sound like there's anything you can do about it either – the evil, I mean. And I'm sorry about the flowery language, okay? But you are dreaming, and that's just the way it comes out sometimes.

So, you think about it and it sounds obvious, the way he explains it. "I'm sure you're right, Mr Barker. But it's not escaped my attention that some of us are on a journey towards overcoming our emotional shortcomings, and without being too showy about it and holier than thou, it helps our cause if we clear the way a bit for others to join with heading in our general direction. I mean, forgive me if I'm wrong about that..."

He settles his hands together on the desk, twiddles his thumbs in contemplation. "No, no. You're not wrong, lad. 'Course you're not. And that's a good point."

"Then, what am I supposed to do about it, as an individual if I see the world descending into cruelty at the hands of the current generation of old Nick's progeny? Am I just to shrug and leave them to get on with it? Leave them to ruin the life chances of others who are struggling to awaken themselves? Leave them to set the world on fire – and I mean literally now."

"Do? What do you mean, do? BE OFFENDED, LAD. And say so. That's what you do."

"That's it?"

"Of course it is. Did you think it was any more complicated than that?"

"No... it's just... when old Nick's progeny are in the ascendant, it can be futile. Even dangerous to go sticking your neck out."

He shrugs. "Then say nothing. Just take it up the arse, nice and quiet, like. But you can make a difference if you've the balls for it."

"It's part of the soul's journey to speak its mind then?"

"Of course it is. You see evil, you point it out. But never lose sight of the fact there's as much evil in you as anyone else. That's the only way you control it, by checking for it in yourself first. Right? That's the only way you save the world."

"By not ignoring the darkness in yourself?"

"That's about the size of it, lad. Didn't say it would be easy."

You get up to leave, thank him and you're about to turn away, but still with the sense of something missing, and maybe that's just your lot as a human being, always something missing, but then he says: "However, if you are minded to speak up, don't forget to play by the rules."

"The rules, Mr Barker?"

"You know what they are, Chris." For once, he smiles. "If you're minded to fight, you leave your ego at the door. If there's only you stands to gain by your actions, then it's just like waving your willy, and probably better to stay out of it."

"Waving my willy? Ah... okay. I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right. And you know it. You weren't apprenticed to this place for nothing."

"If I remember correctly this place shut shortly after I came out of my time."

"Yes, lad. And that was a thing very much regretted by all of us. But think of it another way: by then our work was done. A nasty business, coal, anyway. It was time to be moving on. So go on... hop it."

Chapter Thirty Six

"Get on with it!"

All right, you've been a bit slow to come around this morning, something hanging over from the dream-world as usual, something sticky that makes your head ache, like you've been drinking the night before, even though you haven't. You're also a little nervous, up in front of a hundred students you've never met before. They're lively, garrulous, and the boys are showing off to the girls, waving their willies, though not literally of course. Waving their willies – strange turn of phrase. Where the hell did that come from? Anyway, a round of nervous laughter covers up the culprit who's just told you to get on with it, this being the chief willy-waver seeking to get a rise out of the newbie lecturer, which is you, Chris.

Remember?

Ah, yes... the health service didn't work out too well, did it? Under-funding and side-lining had shunted you into a dead end, in a department set up to fail as American insurance companies circled like hyenas and tore it apart, and no one in charge ever cared that much about anxiety and depression anyway, even though it’s taking over the western world and slowing it to a crawl. So you'd thought to try academia, a so-called last bastion of thought for thought's sake, though you're already beginning to doubt that with office dictats suggesting student numbers are more important than student quality.

Your first lecture then. What was it about?

Ah yes!

Nietzsche

Hell, was it? You can barely remember anything about him now, but you'd boned up on him pretty well for that morning, and then some wag's raising a titter at your expense. The trouble is, and unknown to them, you had your period of hazing a decade before, in a factory of hairy arsed old lags who really knew their stuff, guys who could push you to the edge of tears, then cradle you to bliss with their acceptance. These kids had no idea how tough a thing that could be, that you went into a factory as a child and came out of your time at twenty two a man, hit the ground running, sometimes missing a finger or two, while conversely you go into university as a kid, and come out as a kid missing nothing but a

sense of humility.

So you chalked NIETZSCHE up on the board for all to see, shouty caps and all, then told them they were on their own. Three thousand words by Friday. Key points. Influences. Links to the later psychoanalytical movement. You'd be marking strict, you told them, no mercy. Furthermore, you said, you expected no one to make the grade, that indeed you wagered half would have quit the course by Christmas because they were clearly all a bunch of dick-heads, including the girls, and hadn't got what it took. Then you walked out.

You objected Chris.

See?

Easy as that.

Next week, they were more studious and listened hard.

When objecting, you've got to mean it, it has to come from the gut, and you have to be prepared to do something about it, follow through. But more, it has to benefit others, not just yourself.

So... what are you going to do about this situation now? It feels like it's a hundred years later and the cops have you at the border between England and Scotland which always feels weird because back when you were a kid this used to be nothing more than a road-sign and a change of Tarmac. The Scots have done with you, so now it's razor wire and sniffer dogs on the English side, and searches by brusque cyborg-cops in full-faced helmets with synthesized voices, just like the other lot.

They've pulled you over into a bay, and you're standing there in the pouring rain, shivering because they won't let you get your coat and you've complained about that, and one of them's just asked you if he detects an attitude. So, maybe you got up out of the wrong side of bed that morning, and you tell him yes, fair enough, he detects an attitude, that he detects something other than supine submission to the usual gross indignities dished out by an ever more officious state machinery.

And what are you going to do about it, sir?

"Do about it? Right now I'm going to stand here and take it up the arse, because I've no other choice, officer, but maybe later I'm going to raise an army and come sweep all the ne'er-do-well numpties like you into the fucking sea. And you can't say you haven't asked for it either, you fascist bastards."

No, Chris.

That's most emphatically not what you say. There are rules, remember?

But okay, you're cold and wet, and it's been a long journey and you forget the rules. What were they again? Or maybe you *did* say it, which was really stupid, and maybe that's why he blinds you with his dazzler and shoots you in the heart at point blank with a tazer, so you let your bladder go and fall down in a puddle of rain and pee, paralysed and twitching, but curiously at peace.

The tazer's not a good one – budget cuts and everything – its wires are under-rated, so they vaporise with the current and burn a little hole in your shirt, leaving the darts sticking out of your chest, but by then its work is done. Your heart's stopped and you've passed out of consciousness into another place altogether.

So is that it, you're thinking?

Not much of an ending is it?

Wait, how do you know all this? Well, you seem to be looking down at yourself in the third person, like you're a balloon tethered only lightly to your own wrist, and you're wondering how slender that thread is, and what if it should break.

Is this an out of body experience then? Whoa! This is fascinating! No, Chris, I mean, yes it's an out of body experience and maybe you even find that fascinating, from the professional and even the philosophical point of view, but what you should really be wondering is: *am I dead*?

They search the van anyway, don't find the aliens they're looking for and they're cross about that because they're down on their quotas. Plus they're cross that you're unresponsive for longer than normal, even after one of the cyborgs works up a sweat doing CPR on you. Don't knock it. The fascist bastard is trying to save your life, even if it's only to save his skin.

I suppose in the old days they would have planted some narcotics on you and had you banged up for it, but since that stuff's mostly legal now they need to come up with something else. And since you're still unresponsive they decide the best thing is simply to delete your ID from their records and leave you lying there while they work out what do, because now they're thinking you might actually be irrevocably – you know – *dead*, and that would really spoil their day, you being suddenly a mess of rubbish to be cleaned up and got rid of.

So the one who shot you's being berated by the others. And then

it's agreed they'll just lay you out in your bunk and get some local kid, on pain of a severe beating, to drive you deep into old reiver country and leave you there to rot. Then you'll simply be another old timer who expired alone and homeless at the wheel of his decrepit camper.

Happens all the time.

When they slam the van door shut on you, it cuts that slender cord and, since you're filled with hot air, the big balloon of you rises up into the night sky, and suddenly you're on the road to the inn, heading to the edge of light once more...

Chapter Thirty Seven

But this time it's different. You know you're later than normal by the fact that it’s moonlight that guides you, rather than the last rays of a setting sun. Then there's something odd in the way everyone looks up at you when you walk in, like you're a stranger here when you know by now you're not.

There's a glass of whiskey waiting for you on the counter, but next to it is a big, shiny bell with a handle like they used to ring to call time on school playtimes. Don't worry, you'll get your measure of Old Fettlecairn because the Landlord poured it for you earlier, but it'll be your last one tonight, because you can see from the clock over the bar with its languorous tick-tock, it's going up for eleven now, so your man's already rung last orders on you.

This is it then, Chris.

This is really it!

Shit!

For once as you sit there, you're aware of the whole of your life, or at least one coherent version of it, the beads all strung out along the same time-line, though not necessarily in the right order. Plus the final bead is broken, and hazy - the bit about how it actually ended – though you've a feeling it was somewhat ignominious, like it ended mid-sentence and with nothing fulfilled, or solved or any of that, and as painful as you thought such a thing might be you're actually quite sanguine about it, and your immediate reaction is, well, fuck-em. You did your best. After all, you're quite comfortable here in this already familiar company, though they're looking at you now as if they'd not expected you tonight. Plus, you note the landlord has no key for you, which sort of underlines things, doesn't it?

"I take it you’re full up tonight?”

"Afraid so, sir. Not to worry, though... plenty of room over at the big house, em.. I expect."

"Sure... the big house." So this is really, really *it* then. "No problem."

"I'll get one of the girls to take you over, shall I? There's a short-cut out the back, across the meadow, if you recall."

Yes, indeed. You do recall.

So the waitress comes with her lantern, leads you out into the

garden, and though you're willing to go you're feeling there's something not quite right about the whole thing. Still, there's nothing you can do about any of that now. Your work up top is done, thank God, and the details of it beginning to fade as is the way here, and still you find you don't actually give a damn because you're curious about the big house – the practicalities of it, how it works and so on... the etiquette...

"Will I be able to meet up with Jen there, do you think?"

Ah, yes; ever the pragmatist, Chris!

"I would think so, sir. Yes."

"Good, good. I've been wanting to see her for such a long time. There's so much I want to tell her."

"I know, sir."

"I mean about the way things worked out for me, and I'd like to catch up with how things worked out for her..."

The garden's all in darkness, and the meadow beyond. You make the kissing gate together and she holds her lantern aloft so it casts its glow a little further into the meadow, but then she lays a hand on your arm, draws you back, hesitates to go any further.

"Wait," she says.

"Is everything all right?"

"It's all in darkness, sir. The house, I mean. I don't think they're expecting you."

"Oh? Well then... maybe... maybe I have to go on alone, and the lights will come on as I approach. Shall I take the lantern? It's all right. I'm not afraid. It's kind of you to see me this far. You're very sweet."

The landlord comes out. "Problem, Lizzie?" he asks.

She gestures into the darkness. Where the night should be a blaze of neoclassical opulence, there is only a wall of pitch and the moor beyond, and the great coral finger of the milky way above that. It feels cold and queer. You shiver. You've never felt cold here before. The landlord notices and wraps you in your coat, puts your hat on your head just in time to protect you from a shower of rain, though the skies are clear. Then there comes a scent like a forest floor, of earth and old leaves. But it’s not the scent of death or decay, more something rich and fertile, full of new possibilities.

"Mighty strange," he says.

There's a stirring in the grasses, out in the meadow, a pair of luminous eyes, alarming at first so you catch your breath. Lizzie

raises her lantern a fraction to reveal the small, grey form of a rabbit, curious at the light.

"It's just a bunny," she says.

The landlord places a friendly hand on your shoulder, steers you back to the inn. "Best come in for a bit, sir, where it's warm. See if we can't work out what's goin' on. Truth be told we weren't expecting you tonight, and then... well, last orders is last orders, so to speak."

"I don't mind going to the big house, really. It's fine."

"Well, it's the timing you see? Timing is everything for the big house. Can't just go barging in. They have to make certain... well... arrangements, if you catch my drift, sir."

You're not sure that you do, but by now you're at the bar again, and the landlord's behind the counter, tapping the dial of his trusty clock, which stands now at five past eleven. "Rang last orders bang on ten thirty, like always," he says. "Could the old girl be gaining on us, do you think? What time have you got?"

You reach for the twin pocket-watches, as if to draw them out, gunslinger fashion, but they're not there. You left them in a cairn on a mountain in the Western Isles, remember? a mountain you climbed on the back of a white horse, led by a stoned shaman wearing a coat of many colours.

What was his name again?

Malcom? Magnus?

Hell, that was a night, wasn't it?

Or was that another dream? It's hard to tell the difference now.

"Sorry, I don't know the time any more," you tell him. "I gave up on it, gave it away. And anyway, I thought there was no strict time here? Only what we imagine. Everything's upside down and back to front here, isn't it? I mean, I could be dreaming this from the beginning of my life, the middle or the end."

"That's true, sir. And a good point. It's possible I misread the moment. I mean... moments are terribly subtle things when we don't keep strict time on them."

"So, what happens now?"

"Well, if you'll just wait a bit I'll ring through to the big house and enquire of the Master."

"The Master?"

"The Master, sir, yes."

The Master? This sounds ominous. So you take your glass to a

table by the fire and you sit, and you watch as the landlord dials on a big, black, Bakelite telephone, a telephone from the very beginning of your line in time. And while you wait you remind yourself none of this is literal. There is no pub, no big house, no telephone. It's all part of a narrative aimed at explaining a more difficult concept, but in terms you can relate to, that what we so often think of as the truth and might even spend our whole lives striving towards, is always going to be a simplification of something far more profound, yet abstract.

He comes over then with a key, slides it towards you. "My mistake, sir. Many apologies. Room's all ready for you."

You hesitate. "Em... this *is* my *usual* room?"

"Oh yes, sir. Unless you'd prefer a change..."

You think about this, wonder if it might be a good time to jump back to some other part of your life, well away from the possibility of your demise, potential or otherwise. It sounds like things were more or less finished anyway, that you'd cut yourself off mid-sentence, which you suppose is usually the way with life up top.

So it's back to Skaravaig then and the summer of '87, and that night in the bothy with Jen. Or maybe you tried that once and it didn't work out. And then again, if you recall, there was this girl who looked a lot like Jen, calling herself your djinn, and a strange djinn too, one who granted no wishes and seemed concerned only to stop you making the mistake of changing rooms in the first place. So, in honour of her memory, you take a breath, take up the one key he offers you.

"You're absolutely *sure* this is my old room?"

He nods, something grave about him now. "I'm afraid so, sir. Yes."

Okay, so this isn’t going to be pleasant. But that’s always the way with life, Chris, I mean, all that damned suffering.

And trying to make sense of it.

Chapter Thirty Eight

You wake to a white hot pain in your chest, and a woman kneeling over you with a pair of pliers, a bloodied steel spike in their jaws. She has wild grey hair, looks vaguely familiar, but you can't quite place her.

"Ah, welcome back," she says. "Seems you had a little trouble at the border. Wouldn't be the first time. I'm Barbara, by the way. Babs. I'm a doctor, in case you were wondering. Welcome to England. Sorry about the pliers – they're all I had to hand. They must have shot you up close. It's almost like these things were nailed into your ribs."

You're a little delirious. It's like someone's lit a bonfire on your chest. Nothing like pain for double-underlining the awkward fact of your existence, eh Chris? It beats the hell out of a relatively feeble nagging of a pebble in your shoe. Then, through your somewhat blurry vision, you realise who she is and you boggle momentarily at the awkward patterns sometimes imposed upon your life by fate:

"Bunny?"

"Bunny, you say? Ages since I was called that. Wait... Chris?"

Ah, now... can this be right? The beads on the necklace are all jumbled up and you need to order them, first to last, and fast! But last first: there was the border, crossing back into England. Did you really say that to the Rozzers? What was the point, Chris? And now, to the rescue, Bunny, your old cyber-mistress? Strange twist, or what? or is this to be more a sly comeuppance for past misdemeanours?

Em...

"Well," she says. "I'm glad to meet you in the flesh, so to speak. At last."

"Likewise."

But there's no time to dwell on any of that. You've no idea what the situation is, but you suspect from the look on her face, it's urgent.

She asks if you can remember what happened.

"Not clearly. The border, yes. I said something... gave a bit of attitude. I didn't play by the rules."

No you didn't, Chris. There was no sense making a stand back there for the sake of your Ego, or even for your own material

benefit, not unless it raised the game for others as well, which it plainly did not. Zero points for honour there then.

Remember the concept of honour, Chris?

Hell, that old thing.

"They've been getting more aggressive," she says. "Once people of poor character find a way into positions of authority they open the door to more of their kind, and then we're fucked for at least a generation. But on the other hand, you were really, really lucky."

"Lucky?"

"The kid they paid to dump your body works for us. Plus your van didn't have enough juice to get as far as they told him to take it."

"Ah! Bloody van's useless. A complete lemon. I hate it. I'd be better with a horse and cart."

"Yes... about the only communities thriving right now are the Romanies."

"Us?"

"Us what?"

"You said the lad was working for 'us'? Who's us?"

A big guy enters your field of vision. He wears a balaclava to hide his identity. You remember the Provos from your youth and it’s all you can do to prevent yourself from letting go of your bowels.

"Alive then?" he says.

No, these aren’t the Provos, Chris. Hell, you've been rescued by the Civil Defence Volunteers.

They exist?

"Told you so," says Bunny.

"Well, the van's charged enough for another twenty miles or so," he says. "But the batteries are done, so I can’t say for sure. We should just get it off the road as soon as possible. Listen up now, mate, have you been targeted by the authorities for any reason? Might they be tracking you?"

"What? No. Why would they?"

"Then why are you on the road? Are you on the run?"

"No... not on the run. I mean, not like that. It's personal,... Quixotic,..."

"Okay... so you're just another old codger in a camper van. I believe you. But you should be careful; eccentrics have less room to manoeuvre these days, and God help you if you show attitude to the

authorities. Do that and you'd better not be playing with an empty hand."

"Are you the CDV?"

"Best not to ask," says Bunny.

"But are things so bad as all that? Bunny, you had a good job, a position..."

"Long time ago, Chris. Lost my position at the clinic, drove a bus for a while, now I fight fascists."

Balaclava-man leans close. "Just you think back forty years, mate. Now fast forward to the present and tell me how bad things are."

Okay, fair point.

Forty years ago we were on the verge of just killing ourselves. Now we're poised ready to take the planet with us. He has an air of menace about him, but not directed at you. You're not a threat to him, just something that's cropped up and is in the way right now. But he has patience and room to see you right, which bodes well for the future. He just doesn't want this act of charity to compromise him, or Bunny.

Bunny squeezes your arm. "It's really wonderful, seeing you," she says. "I've tried getting in touch, but... well. It was all a long time ago, wasn't it? Wasn't sure if you'd still be up for it, I mean... all that silliness. Anyway, we need to get you away from here. You're a bit of a mess, I'm afraid, but you'll live. We're going to drive you to a farm, up in the hills. It's quiet there. You can camp until you feel well enough to travel. You've a nasty burn on your chest and your ribs are chipped. That's all going to hurt. And I mean a lot." She presses a box of pills into your hand. "These should help with that."

You recognise them as a brand of grey-market, recreational opioids. "Are these... legal?"

"No, but they're all I have. They're also a bit trippy, so don't take too many."

Then the man's asking you if you've anywhere safe to travel on to after you've rested. You don't know what he means by "safe".

"Away from the cities, towns, anywhere big," he explains. "Anywhere the population density is high. Borders too. Stay away from the main roads, and the railways. There'll be cops, checkpoints everywhere. They'll want ID, movements. And they may just bang you up anyway, depending on if you fit the profile, or they think you're giving attitude."

You try to discern his meaning. It doesn't take much effort. There's going to be trouble, but you wonder what kind of profile he's talking about.

"Have they declared martial law?"

"Not yet," he says. "But they will. They're building camps all over the place. And they're not holiday camps."

The van lurches away. The guy sits up front with the kid who's driving, Bunny stays back with you, holds your hand and you'd take comfort from that, except the burn on your chest and the bruising around your heart still hurts like hell, and the effect of the tazer has you feeling like you've been run over by a truck, every bone, every muscle in your body hammered out and useless. You note she's carrying a gun and a dazzler under her jacket. You'd heard rumours of a resistance building, dismissed them as conspiracies, but even if true it seems futile. She notices you looking, pulls her jacket together, hides the gear.

"No disrespect Bunny, but aren't we all getting a little old for that sort of thing?"

"Sure, but it's our fault we're in this mess in the first place, Chris."

"Our fault?"

"We never shouted stop."

"But... guns? Everything's against you: the state, the cops, the military, the oligarchs, the corporations, the market, the... even the right wing, tabloid toting shot-gun owning, toff-aping citizenry."

She laughs, shrugs. "That's still only about five percent of the population. What's happening now's inevitable, Chris. It's been coming for decades. The cork is out. You'll never get it back in, now."

"But there'll be so much killing."

"It'll take a generation maybe, but we'll tear it down. We have to. And if not by guns, then by simple disobedience."

You admire her spirit, her courage, but you're dismayed by her naivety. It might take a generation yes, but whatever hierarchy emerges is likely to be as corrupt and oppressive as the one it replaces. No sense dwelling on that now though.

You change the subject. "We used to be so naughty, didn't we?"

"Sure. We did. Loved those sessions, Chris. They were a real escape for me."

"Me too. I'll not be forgetting those days in a hurry."

"Okay, so... it looks like we're here. Stay safe, Chris. If you've anyone to love, then love them. If you've not, then love me. Or love me anyway. People are too close with their love, and maybe that's why we're in this mess."

So, they leave you at the farm, drive off in another vehicle, no word if they'll be back to check on you. They have about them an air of urgency, other things to do, a raid on the border infrastructure maybe, so you suspect not. It's hard to imagine Bunny's sweet face as she pulls a trigger, or dazzles a man into submission before kicking his teeth in. But anyway, as usual you sink into the cracks between the joins of reality, fail to get caught up in it, observe it all from a distance.

Farms aren't what they used to be of course. Once upon a time this landscape would have been patterned with wheat and maize and stuff, then some grazing beef and lamb, but it's just rank upon rank of photovoltaics now. The meat of course they grow in tanks on the continent on account of the methane problem. And all of that lends a peculiarly deserted air to the place.

They've parked you in a warehouse, advised you to keep the doors shut to avoid the surveillance drones which they reckon will be working overtime soon, oh and by the way the van's out of juice again, so much so, they had to push it the last hundred yards. Useless heap of junk. You're grateful to your rescuers of course but they're clearly not that bright because with the van tucked away indoors it's not going to charge, is it? And there are no power hookups you can see, and your own portable sun-juicer won't reach as far as the outside, and you're in no state to push the van out yourself even at the risk of a hernia. So basically the van's stuck, and you with it.

But you're alive. You have food and water for a week, enough gas to heat a saucepan, and an addictive pain killer for your wounds, but looks to me Chris like you might as well pop the lot because you're going nowhere and the way you're feeling, everywhere might as well be a thousand miles away, including the farm gate. Maybe Bunny will come back, but can you really count on that? She will if she can, but what if she gets herself arrested and interned, or shot?

You manage a brief shuffle around the warehouse, looking for anything that might prove useful but your arms and legs don't work like they should and your eyes are burning and gritty with spark-

eye from the border-borg's dazzler. There's nothing of any use, the vast space echoing and spare and all it contains are batteries to store juice from the arrays, oh and there's the weird old shell of a farmhouse, 1675 chiselled into the door lintel, all perfectly preserved, thatch and all. Presumably they saved a bit of money by not demolishing it first. Or maybe someone thought it might survive that way to see better times, in spite of the despair of modernity all around it.

Modernity. What the hell is that? Why is it any different to the way things used to be? Or is it like Bunny said and you're just wondering where all the love has gone, that the surface of reality always seems so frigid you have to dig into the past for love, dig into yourself, open your heart and love, or at the very least let love in.

Let love in, Chris, and just... dare to *feel*, dammit!

You discover you don't have energy for much exploration, so make it slowly back to the van. Then you pop a couple of Bunny's pills and wash them down with a swig of Old Fettlecairn, sink back onto your bunk. Maybe you'll feel better in the morning but right now things aren't looking too good. You lift the bottle for another swig, but it might be the last bottle you savour for a while and it's mostly gone now, so you resist the urge and blow a note over the top of it instead.

The pills take the pain, dissolve it in warm water, and you cosy up to it, sleep a little. When you wake, it's already morning and Jen's sitting on the edge of your bunk, watching.

"Well," she says. "This is a fix you're in. Looks like we'll be getting that long walk after all. And about time too. Hell Chris, I've been waiting nearly forty years for this."

Ah...

You know she's not real. Not even a ghost. She's just an hallucination brought on by Bunny's dubious pills. But still, she's there, and you'll have to deal with it.

"Em... walk?"

"Well, how else do you think you're getting out of here?"

You check your 'phone, hoping she won't be there when you look up from it. You have OS maps, but it looks like the GPS has been encrypted, so the device can't pinpoint your position any more. There were rumours this would happen at the first sign of public unrest. Only state approved borgs – those with guns – have

the codes now, and the rest, well the young in particular, have forgotten how to work with paper maps and compasses.

You look up, but she's still there.

"Okay, so where do you propose?" you ask. "All the way to India?"

"Ha! Not in your condition. I was thinking more Northumberland. You should be able to manage that."

"Northumberland? I live in Manchester."

"You have a house there, yes. But it's like that old house out there in the warehouse. It's a dead place now, covered over by modernity. It doesn't feel the wind and the rain any more. It's not alive, Chris."

"But Northumberland's..."

"It's about a hundred miles from here, good paths, bridleways, well away from areas of population, all the way to the sea. We can do it in four or five days, depending on how much enthusiasm you can muster. Come on, Chris. It'll be fun!"

"And what then, when we reach the sea? Do we throw ourselves in?"

"Idiot. You know what you've got to do when you get there."

"Oh?"

"Accept the love of a good woman."

Odd, eh, Chris? That's exactly what you're thinking too – I mean, if she'll have you. This bullshit of finding yourself on the road, it was stupid of you, but what it really was, what you couldn't do, was open yourself up and accept a woman like that wanted you to be with her. We're talking about Sophia Klein here. And though you said you'd be back, she didn't believe it either. Did it never occur to you Chris that, though a part of you is wondering if for Sophia to exist you have to dream her into being, without Sophia's dreaming, you don't exist either.

"But what about us, Jen?"

"Oh, come on, Chris. You know I'm not really here, don't you?"

"I suppose so..."

"Though having said that, I'll be with you every step of the way. Like I guess I always have. I don't know what we're about. It's like we were joined at the hip some other time, like a footnote, you know?"

"A footnote? We're more than a footnote, Jen. I've spent my whole life thinking about you."

"I know... I know... and maybe we're one of those footnotes that only makes sense when we've come to the end of the book. Then we look it up and it sets us on a different course, together maybe, I don't know, but whatever it is only makes sense, once the ground's been prepared by all the other lives we have to live first."

"I wouldn't have lasted five minutes with you on the road to India. You'd've fired me off after the first couple of days."

"Oh, don't be so sure about that. You were quite a dish when you were younger. You know?"

Now you're wondering how you can tell it's morning, since the van's banged up in a warehouse anyway and you with it, so night's pretty much the same as day. So you wise up at last, and realise you're still asleep and dreaming. Obviously.

Ah...

"It's possible then, somewhere in the great scheme of things, there may come a time where we walk out of that bothy on Skaravaig together?"

"Maybe, Chris. But did you never wonder that the way things worked out was the closest thing to perfection for both of us anyway? At least this time around."

"But if we'd only done it, been together, you might have had a house and settled down and been a mother like you told me was the thing you wanted, the thing you were secretly running from all the time."

"And maybe I did, Chris, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't have resented you for it, and wished I was on the trail to India instead. I mean, a story doesn't have to end well for it to be a good story, does it? Anyway, you go back to sleep and I'll catch up with you on the other side. Okay?"

Chapter Thirty Nine

There's a horse outside the inn. It's drinking water from a bucket, held by a dread-locked blonde-haired man wearing a long coat of many colours. You feel you should know him, but he's a younger version of the guy you think you knew, the one with the grey hair and the pink eyes of an old stoner.

He greets you: "Hey... what's up dude?"

Beneath his psychedelic coat there's a voluminous silk shirt, like out of the eighteenth century, and a red and green paisley patterned steam-punk waistcoat,... oh yes, and a pair of pocket-watches on gold chains. Something tells you those watches used to be yours, that for all of his charm, he's a rogue and a thief, a charlatan and a swindler, but anyway he's welcome to them. Time's passing doesn't concern you any more, so long as you don't miss last orders just yet, though there's something a little topsy-turvy about that as well these days, as if you're playing hard and fast with your own reality.

Does that mean you're finally getting to grips with it? Are you on the cusp of a revelation, Chris?

"How you doing?"

The horse seems to know you, pauses in its noisy slurping, offers you its wet snout. You offer it your palms and it sniffs them.

"Here for the night?" you ask.

"Just passin' through, man. Great place. You know it?"

"I've a feeling I do, yes. Hard to be certain though."

"Oh? How come?"

"Well... you do know you're dreaming, don't you?"

"Really? Oh, yea, I guess. That would explain a lot."

It's a beautiful evening, warm, the sun still some way off setting and just now casting a pink light that deepens to a pale blue-grey at the horizon. You sit out at a bench and a waitress appears. She seems to know you too, looks familiar, but you can't place her.

"Usual, Chris?"

You nod, though you've no idea what your usual is.

"Thing is," you tell him. "Are you dreaming all of this, or am I?"

"Well, I guess it must be you."

"How come?"

"Well, none of it seems to be freaking you out, man."

"Doesn't seem to be freaking you out either."

"Suppose not. Maybe neither of us are dreaming it. Maybe she is." He sits with you, hangs his head a while. "Look, I'm sorry. I get the feeling – don't know how, and don't you go getting upset or nothing – but I think these watches are yours. Can't say I remember how I came by them though."

"That's fine, mate. Keep them. I'm done with them."

"Yea, but you didn't mean for me to have ‘em, did you?"

"If I'd known you fancied them I would have gifted them to you. Anyway, you're welcome. Just be careful they don't lock you down... in time I mean."

"I'd like to pay you for ‘em."

"Really, it's no bother."

"Will you take my horse in exchange?"

"Eh?"

Now that's a peculiar thing and you're about to decline since you've a feeling it's not his horse to give anyway, but then the waitress comes back with a glass of whisky, and says you should consider it, that a horse is a useful thing in a world where you can't rely on anything else. And by the way did you know there's a hole burned clean through your shirt and you smell of a mixture singed hair, and pee?

"Em... I do?"

The stoner agrees. "Though I thought the latter thing was me, actually."

It's rather a large glass of whisky, and you tell her so but she just smiles, says not to worry, that the Landlord thought you probably needed it, and it's all on the tab anyway, so enjoy. Then she takes a closer look at your chest, says you're heart's showing through a bit and, if you'll forgive a moment of gender stereotyping, she says she'll come to your room later and sew it back up for you, put some ointment on to take the sting away.

You thank her for that, say you'll see her later then, and the dread-locked guy's eyes are rolling as if to say she's pretty hot, and you have to agree with him there, but what you feel for her is strictly spiritual, so it's maybe self limiting to be thinking that way at all. Besides, if you wanted a lover in this place, the hottest lover you could imagine, you've only to, well, *imagine* it and she'll be sitting at the next table, purring at you.

Don’t you dare, Chris.

Focus now,... we’re almost done.

So, you take a gulp of whisky, feel the world set to rights at once, and care nothing if you don't wake up in the morning.

"So is it a deal, man?"

"Eh? Deal?"

"The horse. It seems to like you."

"Don't you need it?"

"It's just a dream-horse, man. A symbol or somethin'. You know how places like this work. It's not like I'm going to wake up and find I've no horse is it? I mean, that's if I have a horse in the first place."

"Good point. Then, sure... and thanks."

“Okay, done... wow, this is freaky!”

You'll have to ask the landlord what to do with it. He's a handy man, the landlord, knows all sorts of practical things. You have in mind the Roman Emperor, Aurelius, when you think of him, then remember from somewhere the dread-locked guy is called Marcus, that he once taught you how to ride a horse as the two of you trekked up a mountain by the sea, on an island infested with microscopic blood sucking things. You check your arms and legs at once for their pea-like attachment – suckers of clean blood, agents of infection – and you shudder.

Marcus bids you goodnight, fades to shadow as he walks away into his own state of wakefulness. You lead the horse into a meadow, close the gate and watch it cropping the grasses for a while. It seems content enough, so you take your whisky inside, collect the key from the landlord, take care to check it’s your usual room, and make your way upstairs.

You recall you once had a neat little sports car. You parked it outside and it wasn't there in the morning. It was a symbol for letting go of a thing you once held dear but was now obsolete. You get that now. You're hoping the horse won't be there in the morning either, and for sure it won't be because you don't own a horse in the waking world up top – at least you think you don't.

You're in the bath later, soaking in hot water while you think back on all of this. The waitress, good as her word, is sitting on the side, smelling of soap and loveliness, while she carefully stitches that hole in your chest back together. You're not concerned. Like the horse, it's just a symbol after all, this exposed heart. She applies ointment with her fingertips, then sees you on your feet and dries you gently – every damned part of you – sees you to bed, turns out the light and leaves you to sleep.

But then you think of something and call her back: "Wait! Is the big house lit up tonight?"

"Yes, but not for you, Chris."

"And the heart, the exposed heart. What does that mean?"

"Oh... opening yourself up to feeling, I suppose... something like that."

"And that has to be good, doesn't it?"

"Given your history, Chris, I'd say so, yes."

"All right. Thank you."

"Now sleep. Set sail for the morning. See what tomorrow brings."

"I will. Goodnight."

But you're also thinking an exposed heart could mean something else, something about the intensity of experience. That's the thing with symbols you see? They can mean anything you want them to, but that doesn't mean you're wrong in the ones you choose. You're part of the equation, see? That's what makes it all so interesting.

You're catching on, Chris. You're catching on!

Chapter Forty

Intensity? Sure, you live more in five minutes on a battlefield, than in twenty years of peacetime. Right? But what does that mean to you this minute? You don't know, do you? And all right, that's mainly because you're still coming round, working out just where the hell you are and what your "now" consists of.

Okay, take it slow: you're in the van, in a deserted warehouse. Remember? The van's flat and unless you've the muscle to push it out into the light, you've a long way to walk, but on the up-side, your chest doesn't hurt half as much this morning. Indeed, you feel like you've got proper use of all your motive functions again, but there's still no way you'll push the van outside on your own.

All right... it's coming clearer now. It's not just fear... like when the enemy's shooting at you and you think you might die, it's more the rate of change of experience, and maybe a differential equation could help in those circumstances, if only it weren't all muddled up with some other function that seems to be related to the amount of time you think you've got left on earth. Except you've ditched all that, haven't you? The time thing? So what's the problem?

It's that transcendent function, like Pi, and you'll never get at it, like you'll never square the circle with compasses and line. But didn't you once say you can achieve the same thing without the risk of bloodshed, just by making a change within yourself? And that's what the whole of life's about, really. I mean... transcending what you see, by seeing with, not through the eye.

Hmm. Maybe.

That old saw's been tailing you all your life, hasn't it? and you never did get a proper feel for it. Right now, you're simply hungry. So you fry up what supplies you've got, take a box outside to sit upon, and you eat your breakfast as the sun comes up. Take a gulp of fresh coffee, and try to shake yourself free of these images hanging over from the dream.

You're exposed out here of course, only a matter of time before you're spotted by a drone, or a spycam and they swoop in for an ID. At one time they'd be visible – the spycams – big boxy things with eyes, mounted on poles. They were everywhere, bold as brass, and you don't suppose there are any less of them now – indeed probably the opposite – but now they're hidden, leaving you to assume

they're everywhere, that even the knotholes in the wood, and the eyes of potatoes are spying on you, that if you ever allow yourself to think you're having a private moment, chances are you're not. So, you either let the thought of that drive you insane, or you retreat to a calmer place inside yourself, ignore the fuckers, and enjoy your breakfast.

It's going to be a lovely day.

So, what are you going to do? You'll take a change of clothes, what grub you can carry in your sack, a bottle of water and the old OM10 of course. You've a couple of rolls of film still, but they've got to be the last of it, I mean now with things breaking down as they are – more and more difficult to get it processed and digitised. Sure, it's ridiculous; you should have ditched that thing years ago, its once bright lens clouding over now with mould between the elements, like your own vision's perishing with age. But you swear it still helps to see things differently, overlay it all with the stuff of dreams.

What about shelter? Good point. Can't rely on there being a handy barn to sleep in when you want one. There's a bit of plastic sheeting, some twine. You can improvise a bivouac with that. It's not ideal but you can manage a few days if the weather's fine.

There comes a sound then, and you suspect you've been rumbled, that it's the owners come to call the cops on you for trespassing, have you dazzled and tazered all over again, or maybe even just plain shot this time. Except it's not the owners. It's a Romany caravan trotting up with a jingle of pots and pans and harnesses. The guy tips his hat and pulls up, asks if he can draw water from your tap. He thinks you're the owner– a morning for mistaken identities all round then, so you tell him you're not the owner, shrug, suggests he helps himself anyway. Tap's right there, and it's only water, man.

The stuff of life.

His van's drawn by shaggy horse, or maybe if you were a proper horsey type, you'd call it a pony. A couple more ponies are trailing behind. One of them breaks your dream. You remember buying one, or at least exchanging it for a couple of pocket-watches – obviously triggered by your trip to Skaravaig and your meeting with Marcus, except you're sure you dreamed about that ages ago. Except how could it have been? It's not that long since you were there, surely? Was it only last night you dreamed it then?

Ah, a bit of retro-causation. That old thing... better watch out, Chris. It means your axis is about to tilt...

As the guy fills a couple of buckets, you get talking. He's off to sell his ponies to a fellah he knows. You ask him, only half joking, if he'll let you have one in exchange for the camper. He laughs at that, tells you, with respect, it's a crazy idea, and can you even ride a pony? Sure, you can ride a pony. But then he says wouldn't it be a better idea to haul the van out into the sunshine where it can charge? He'll give you a hand, or he can hitch the horses up and they'll have it out in no time. He's a man of good ideas, quick thinking, good natured. Failing that he says, can't you call out the vehicle assistance people? You suppose you could and you wonder why you never thought of that, except you're sick to death of the van and want rid of it.

So he takes a closer look at it, says he knows this other fellah who deals in them, and the batteries, duff as they are are still worth a bit, re-purposed to other uses. So, if you're sure you want to sell it, he'll give you a couple of grand for it there and then, cash, plus the pony and a bit of tack. He's thinking he can trade it on for a profit.

Now a couple of grand's about half an inch of well-worn twenties, and he seems to have no trouble producing it, cash being the stock in trade now of the grey market – few other bona-fide businesses dealing in it any more. You've not handled cash for long a time – and never that much in one go anyway. It's perfectly legal but it has a dodgy feel to it all the same that's thrilling. So then you tell him he can have the pony back and all the tack and stuff when you're done, that you just need it to get you to the coast. So he says he knows this other fellah out by the way you're heading and to get in touch with him when you're ready, if you're serious about not keeping the horse. So you shake and the deal is done.

Then off he trots with the keys to the camper, and the logbook and everything and you're left with a pony that doesn't look up to much but, on the positive side, it's friendly and seems docile. You've a feeling you didn't get the best of the two, but so long as it makes it to Northumberland you don't mind. It's better than walking, and on horseback you should make it in a couple of days instead of a week on foot.

All you have to do now is find your way.

Strange, Chris. What made you want to buy a horse?

Not that it wasn't a good idea.

So you saddle up like a cowboy. Okay, let's see... how does this go? Can you remember? Tap its middle a bit with your legs, tell it to walk on, and off it goes, nice and easy. Touch on the rein to the left, it goes left, touch right and it goes right. But no brakes, remember? Don't worry though, we'll not be galloping, you hope, at least not in your condition, and the creature looks long past breaking a trot anyway.

You forgot to ask its name.

Okay, so this is a little weird, but we're off. It'll be fine, Chris. I mean, what could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Forty One

You realise after all this time – or at least the dream's telling you it's a long time – the road to the Inn at the Edge of Light does not lead into the sunset, but away from it. This is important, you think. The sun is setting behind you, lighting up the inn, so all along, symbolically at least, you've not been walking towards the end of things at all, more to new beginnings.

Sure, it catches you up eventually, the darkness I mean, but you've always your back to it, and by the time it overtakes things you're already cosy in that warm fug of inns from long ago, from a time before big-screen televisions, and space invader machines, and one-armed bandits, and juke-boxes – before all that, a time of past-time games – your darts and doms of an evening, your bowls of a sleepy summer's afternoon. And your musics from the fiddle and the bodhran of a travelling folk-band.

Other places in the world do it differently of course. Myth, I mean. But this is England, or at least it's one of the underlying myths of England, meaning its something you're inventing to make sense of a deeper mystery. Another way of looking at it would be it's something to comfort you in the face of life's inscrutability, to hint at a hidden meaning beneath the surface of apparent absurdity.

You don't have to believe in any of this, of course, but believing in it makes you no less or no more right or wrong than if you don’t believe in it. It's just that our instincts incline us in this direction, the direction of myth, you know? Myths grant structure to the underlying chaos of the psyche, they open channels through which its denizens might approach and we can deal with them in an orderly and mutually respectful manner.

Without an underlying myth, the times are doomed to chaos, and the archetypes act out their craziness in the world, unfettered by invented ritual, even if that ritual be no more than the landlord pouring you one more glass of the water of life before last orders are rung. Nothing is certain in life, or in death, but it's best to favour the direction our instincts are leaning, for only then do we live as we should.

The landlord looks up as you enter, smiles a welcome. You're still known here at least, even though you have the impression your world up top is becoming strange, your face a stranger wherever

you roam, and where the sense of yourself is mostly that of a man lost. But here, wherever you have laid your head in life, you're always on home ground.

And yet, even here tonight, there's something odd. For sure, you could swear the landlord usually has your drink ready on the counter, so you don't even have to ask for it, and you'd be struggling anyway, knowing what you want, and even if you did you never could remember the names of things here.

You open your mouth to speak, but no words come out.

"The Master's been asking for you, sir."

"Oh? The Master?"

"He's wondering if he could have a word."

Sounds serious, right?

"Em... would this be about my tab? Do I need to settle up or something? If you could just let me know what I owe..." You fish about in your pocket. You have no wallet and pull out instead a handful of seashells, but you don't suppose they're legal tender here.

"Oh, no. It's not that. Not at all sir. Indeed, your credit's always good here. No, I don't know what it's about. I just keep the inn, you see? And so far as the inn's concerned all's square between us."

"Okay." You slide the seashells back into your pocket – never know when they'll come in handy, eh, Chris? "Then I suppose... I'd better go and find out."

"Very good, sir. If you'll follow me?"

He leads you to a back room, all cosy in the firelight, a private saloon, but it's empty. No Master here. Then he opens a side door, a secret door that's hiding behind a curtain, leads you down a flight of stairs to a smuggler's tunnel, already lit by candles and leading off into a humid distance.

You can't help thinking out loud: "This is absurd!"

The landlord concurs: "True, sir. But sometimes I find things do fall into place which have a certain melodramatic flavour to them. And it’s best just to go along, don't you think?"

You're not sure you do. Dreams tend to follow your waking cues, and unless you've recently taken leave of your senses...

"The Master's waiting for me down there?"

"In a manner of speaking, sir. You'll find the passage leads straight across to the Big House, then up some stairs into the main hallway. Can't miss it."

"The Big House?"

You have the impression the Big House is a milestone on the way to somewhere else, a place from which there is no turning back, but the landlord hastens to reassure you: "Not to worry, sir, I'll have your room all ready for you when you return."

"Same room?"

"Whatever you wish, sir. Don't trouble yourself on that score... not at all."

But you do... trouble yourself. The landlord is at times too agreeable, and you know he'll tell you anything you want to hear.

"But nobody comes back to the same room from over there, do they?"

"Not as a rule. But like I say, I'm not sure what the Master has in mind on this occasion, though I'm certain he'll explain it, and it'll all make perfect sense. Wise man, the Master."

"Okay... but... no, wait... what's caused this?"

"Sir?"

"I mean this... anomaly. This is *definitely* an anomaly, right?"

The Landlord gives a shrug. "Something you ate, sir?"

What?

You didn't pop another opioid, did you, Chris? Or was it all those winkles you and Jen ate back at the beginning of time? You know hallucinogens open the doors on all sorts of stuff -–crazy, crazy unconscious contents and dreams – and whatever spills out of them becomes your life's work, rounding them up and putting them in order, like herding rabbits. And too much work of that sort can make a man crazy. Hell! There wasn't something wrong with one of them, was there? Those black market opioids? After saving your life, did Bunny inadvertently slip you the means of taking it?

"But I'm definitely coming back, right?"

"I'm sure all options are open, sir. It's very rare we use the tunnel. An anomaly. Yes, that's exactly what it is. It breaks the normal rules, wouldn't you say?"

He's telling you what you want to hear again.

Dammit, the only answer is to go on.

See where it leads.

How far?

How deep?

So... take a breath Chris, and remember the dream can't kill you, especially not if you're already dead, and if you are, then, well, the worst is already over, isn't it?

It's not a long tunnel, not as long as the distance from the inn to the big house seems in daylight anyway, but then you are dreaming and there are no such things as immutable measures here, so anything's possible. At the end of the tunnel, there's a stairway to take you up, and you emerge from behind a curtain into a lavishly decorated hallway, into light and the scent of freshness, of lavender and rosemary. A butler receives you with a smile, gesturing with his outstretched, shepherding arm and a white gloved hand.

"Welcome, sir. This way."

The big house doesn't seem at all unfamiliar. As you follow the butler you see pictures of your past in oils, and all elaborately framed as if it was worth the effort. You see the portraits of those who gave you life down many generations, also of the lives they lived, and the various ones you've lived as well, but which you've forgotten, and you think it will be a pity to forget them again, but that's just the way it is.

There are portraits of past loves, loves lost and never met, and loves you've yet to meet, and all of it so familiar, because you realise of course, you've been here before, walked this corridor before, countless times. You know this. You know you know this, but also that in life, like in dreaming, we are apt forget – facts, memories – everything dissolving back into the wordless spin of living.

You catch a glimpse of yourself in a gilded mirror, looking ever so formal in a dark suit, and younger, as young as you've always imagined yourself to be, only to be disabused of the fact in later years whenever you look in mirrors and see an increasingly grey old man looking back. But not this mirror. This mirror confirms the timelessness of your own self, your own being, your own soul.

The butler opens a panelled door onto a room of firelight and candelabra. And there's this guy, rising from a wing-backed chair, white-haired, smiling. He looks like you, a certain family resemblance anyway. It's like you know him from an old photograph from way, way back. Symbolic, Chris, remember? Everything here is symbolic.

"Hello, Chris," he says.

It's not the greeting of a stranger, but of one well met many times.

He gestures to the chair beside his, and you both settle. On the table between you there's your glass of whisky, and a pair of keys,

both with your number on them, and you're lucid enough to know there's a choice coming up.

Which one is correct?

He reads your mind, crosses his hands in his lap. "Oh, Chris. Both are correct. There are no wrong choices in life. Indeed what you sometimes perceive to have been your biggest mistakes can be the most instructive."

"I was afraid you were going to say something slippery and self-helpy like that."

So... you know him, you've always known him, you've just forgotten that's all, forgotten his name, too, which, even now he withholds. Behind him, there's a cabinet, mahogany inlaid with mother of pearl. It bears a pattern of impossible geometric construction, a circle squared, a way back to heaven measured out by arc and line from the profane dimensions of the waking earth. The cabinet contains all the keys to your various lives, to every life you've ever lived, and some you haven't.

You study the intersections of geometry, but its no use. It looks so simple but you know you'll never be permitted to remember any of it, so you make your peace with that and let it go.

The Master?

Oh, come on, you know by now: he's the grandfather of them all, of all your lives, the gatherer of wisdom, the curator of the lessons as learned from the universe through your eyes, and more, he is the dreamer of your dreams.

He seems kindly, not cold or scowling, not like the churchmen of your youth, of your Sunday Schools and your mumbled Our Fathers, those pious charlatans who taught you to fear the emptiness of life as much as death. I mean... you're assuming there's something of spiritual significance here.

And religion is easy. It's spiritual matters that are more difficult.

Heard that before somewhere, Chris? Other times, other stories of lives you don't remember living.

Anyway,.... you were right about that one at least.

And the quest?

Ah, the quest, Chris! You wish you could have worked that one out a little better for him, presented him now with a solid gold brick of your own wisdom, your humble contribution to at least a small part of your greater self, but hell... you did your best with the available material, and with the circumstances of your life, such as

they were.

That cabinet intrigues you. You'd love a rummage through its cubby-holes, a glimpse of all the things your greater self has done and seen. Maybe it contains the keys to a better working out, to a bigger life, one that doesn't end in ignominy and a world on fire, a world shot to bits by ignorance and greed. For sure you would have spared your better self all of that, but some things are bigger than a single man's influence and what can he do about it, other than stay true to himself, to live and believe in the myth of our times? And if the times have lost the art of myth-making, then to live and believe in a myth of his own imagining.

He takes up his glass, raises it. "What shall we drink to?"

"Oh... I don't know. Perseverance, and good intentions, perhaps?"

He allows a smile at that, nods warmly. "Yes... that'll do. Indeed. Perseverance and good intentions. When he feels all else has failed, a man can always fall back on that."

Then you wonder: "I'm sorry, I...."

"What is it, Chris?"

"I hope I didn't... I mean that I haven't disgraced myself... and that's why I'm here. I hope I didn't... take anything... inappropriate. If I did, I assure you it was an accident. At least I hope it was."

"Ah... rest easy, Chris."

"But... I have no recollection of what I was doing... where I am in my life that's brought me to this."

"Then let me put you at ease. Close your eyes a moment. Look..."

So then you're awake. A snatched breath brings with it the scent of a wet meadow. You're in a sleeping bag under a hedge, a tarpaulin draped over it for shelter, a horse cropping grasses nearby. It's somewhere in the Cheviots, a black, moonless night. All you have with you, besides the clothes you wear, are an old camera, a couple of rolls of film and a pebble you picked up from the beach at Porth Neigwl.

You've food for a couple of days, and you left the pills behind because your chest doesn't hurt any more – something about being washed away in a warm bath, attended by a pretty girl with a needle and thread. As for the old Fettlecairn, you gave the last of it to that old Romany.

For a while, earlier, before you slept, there was a strange glow to the north, somewhere in the region of the border, like fires, like

the mythic ghost-flicker of wartime bombing. There was the crackle of gunfire too like on a news report from a failing nation state. In a sense you've felt this all your life so, as extraordinary as it might be in reality, it's a thing you can still withdraw from, secure in an old age that knows it can make no difference to the fact of matters, that after a lifetime spent trying to understand the world, we come full circle in the knowledge that the best any of us can do is try to understand ourselves in the context of life as we find it, and learn to moderate our own shortcomings.

You hear an owl, the flutter of a bat, the snuffle of a badger. The human creatures who would hurt and cheat are engaged elsewhere tonight. As for your heart, you have the feeling of an accelerated dream-healing, and it no longer aches as it once did. Was that just now, in the dreaming, or was it days ago? What were you dreaming just now, Chris?

You forget, don't you?

It doesn't matter.

Let it go.

At first light you'll be heading east again, into the sun, into the light, and the new day, down to the sea and to a woman... if she's still living there. It feels like you've been away such a long, long time, and you're far from certain you did not imagine her anyway. But if she does exist, then you're going back because you've opened your eyes a bit and can see that after the whole of a life spent in doubt, you are at last capable of seeing you're worthy of being loved, that we do not get to choose who it is that's drawn to loving us. And for someone like you, Chris, so close with your time, the best you can do is give your time to someone else.

Someone like that.

Sure, it makes sense to you right now, in this cosy, semi waking state. Whether it will in the morning though is another matter. But for now rest easy in it, close your eyes, safe in the bosom of nature's nocturnes as they thrum gently all around you... sink back once more into the blackness of sleep.

And so...

"I seem to have drifted off for a moment. Wait... ah, yes, I see."

You take a sip of whiskey, contemplate anew the keys on the table. One bears the number 26, the other... well the other picks up more or less where you left off. And are you really as old as that, Chris? Clearly there's plenty of life in the old dog yet, but too old,

surely, to be making a habit of sleeping out under a hedge? You need to find a warm bed, and woman willing to share it with you.

But what kind of age is this to finally be making peace with your life? I mean when it's already three quarters over. It would have been better to do it at 26, surely? then live the greater part of your life in the comfort of equanimity, than to have spent it railing at the tragedy and the loss and the sheer absurdity of all you've witnessed.

But then you suppose the point is none of it can possibly make sense until you connect the inner to the outer life. And what are the chances of that when the memory leaks away, forcing you to take it on trust your life is not in vain, when all the evidence suggests the opposite.

What was it Jen said that time? That she'd found herself early, took to the road so as not to lose herself again. Did she really mean that? Or was it just an admirable aspiration. Was Jen not simply as lost as you,... you looking to the way ahead, her looking back in case the fog of life closed over her again.

That photograph of her? the one you took with your old OM10, it's one of your most treasured possessions, isn't it? carried it through thick and thin, through adversity and bewilderment alike, and that key there, number twenty six is offering you the opportunity to add to it the panoply of wedding days, children, picnics by the sea, and all the harshness and the tragedy and the joy and misery, and the astonishing beauty of life as you've already experienced it, but suddenly all of it’s ahead of you again, or at the same time... or something... only this time with Jen. Hers was a long road, self imposed and she was running from the one thing that would give meaning to her life. Nothing you can do about that. She steers her own course.

You? You have children, had a wife, had lovers. Lived through good times and bad, learned to be the one still standing, though your life now looks set to run into a banal nihilistic dystopia, and a thing you can do nothing about. You've spent your whole life wondering how to fix yourself, Chris, not realising that's exactly what you were doing all along – fixing yourself – and that it makes no difference, the times you live in.

So, same room, is it?

Sure,

You take up your key, leave the summer of '87 on the table, leave it as a marker, as a turning in the way. Yes, Jen defined you,

set the mood-music for all that followed and in that way she was always more to you than a looking back, and though you met her just the once, she was, in a sense, your past, your present and your future. And you wouldn't want to be interfering with any of that, now would you? And if it's right that things should have been any different, that's for another part of yourself to wake up to one day and discover for sure, isn't it?

"Nicely put," he says.

"Thank you. It would have been something though... eh?"

"Oh?"

"Jen..."

"You think so?"

"I'm not fishing for details... but is there a part of me, somewhere were she and I..."

"Ah... takes two to tango, Chris. But if it's any comfort, I don't think you were wrong in the choice you made that day. I can't say for sure but maybe Jen spent the rest of her life thinking about the choice she made, just as we did."

"She made a choice?"

"Yes... not to be there when you woke up."

"Ah... that. Yes. And nothing we can do about it, I suppose."

He rings a little bell, and the butler appears.

"Time to go, Chris."

"Yes... still, I suspect we'll meet again."

"We shall."

"I do remain... optimistic, you know? And all that nihilistic stuff, the collapse, the dystopia... it's not the way I would have had it turn out."

He nods. "Let's drink to that."

So you finish your Old Fettlecairn, drain the glass to the dregs like its your last and then you stand as if to take your leave, but now he's holding out the other key. Is this a test? But you've been refusing that one all your life because you know you hadn't the perspective on life not to simply go and ruin it all. And anyway, you're quite liking the way things are turning out just now, like your life's building up to the one revelation its capable of...

"I've made my choice, sir. I'll not swap them, if that's all right with you. Perhaps save that one for another time, if I can. There's someone I need to devote my time to, and learn from that what I can in the time that's left – surely that's worth the while?"

"Eminently, yes. But... why not take both?"

"How can a man hold two keys at once, and make sense of them?"

"Perhaps the time has come, Chris, for the one to inform the other. I know you don't think you're ready, but I sense you've gained sufficient perspective."

So... well done Chris. It's taken most of your life, but it seems you've levelled up at last. You grasp more tightly then the key that leads you back to Sophia, and pocket the one that leads you all the way back... way, way back...

...to Jen.

Chapter Forty Two

You're an incongruous figure leading a horse down that green sward by the North Sea. Better to walk, you're thinking because another day in the saddle would have killed you. You're coming along the rocky path under the ruined castle walls, the gaunt bulk of them assailed on all three sides by a leaping, roaring ocean – that castle with its sleeping maiden, and an army of men.

You cut their heads off, one by one, remember? Some woke up before you could finish the job and they've been troublesome over the years but all their heads are down there now, rolling about in the seaweed, like the bobbing heads of seals. No need to fear them any more. As for the maiden? Well, she's older now, and wide awake and sitting by the rocks with a bottle of Old Fettlecairn, as if waiting for you.

The bottle's glinting in a flitting sunlight and it's empty but for a little roll of paper tucked inside, another potent condensate of her mind, her thoughts, balanced out there on the edge of the sea, on a jutting rock, out at the very edge of liminality. It's all stoppered up and waiting for the tide to take it. She's curled, lithe as a girl, her chin tucked into her knees, unaware of your coming.

So you raise the camera, focus, wait until the waves crash, sending up a fine sparkling bokeh of spume, a blur of silver against the blue-grey, broiling energy of the sea. A touch on the ring brings her into sharpness and your eye sees true.

You call out: "I'm sure there's a law against littering the sea that way."

She turns, you take the photograph, crank the film, bracket, take another, bracket. You hope your guy's still processing this stuff because that look of hers on seeing you's a real keeper and you swear to God you'll have it framed for all eternity, or you would if framing was still a thing and not a long gone convention like sideburns and kipper ties. Still, it would be a pity if the mere fact of a revolution or a civil war or – whatever they're calling it – got in the way of one's eccentricities, wouldn't it? And a modern camera would never do, would never see for you in quite the same way as this one does.

She's perplexed by your bedraggled experience, your thousand-mile weariness, and of course by the flea-bitten horse beside you,

which just now stoops to crop the grasses. In your brief acquaintance with this gentle creature, it has taught you that from a certain perspective the affairs of men are so much nonsense, hiding the truer facts of life, like sweet grass and air.

Sophia adjusts her smile to a stage-frown. "That law's for plastics, you dick. Glass is fine."

"I was meaning the poem inside of it."

"Oh, that. Ha!"

"So... how's it going?"

"Going? Well, since you ask, I've been too long out here listening to the waves with no one to talk to, the world falling over at my back, and me not able to do a damned thing about any of it."

"But is that not the thing with the world at our backs, Sophia? It's just so much bigger than we are, and it has ideas of its own. How we deal with that – with our powerlessness – that's also important."

"Okay, Einstein, to whom?"

"To us, of course. To you and me. To anyone who's ever felt the way you're feeling now."

She smiles. "You would have made a good psychoanalyst, you know? Muddling about, knee-deep in bullshit, looking for the tiniest of things to ring true."

"Thanks, I think."

"So what are you doing with a horse?"

"Oh that. Long story. He doesn't look like much, does he? But he's a placid soul, well travelled, and has seen me safe this far. Story of my life, you might say. I mean, metaphorically speaking."

"That horse is a mare."

"A what?"

"It's a *she,* Chris."

"Ah... that would explain it. A lady horse. So, anyway, seriously, how are things? My phone's been flat for days, and I didn't want it tracking me anyway."

"You've not heard the banks have collapsed and the police are rounding up anyone who has a funny look about them?"

"No... but neither surprises me. Had a bit of trouble with the Rozzers myself at the border. So, other than that, everything's fine then?"

"Well, yes... except I've no money. Ran out this morning. And no point visiting the cash machine."

"Just as well I turned up then. I've a couple of grand in my pocket. Sold the van for cash. "

"Okay, that'll keep us going for a while, hopefully until things get patched together again. We're smuggling food across from Holland now. There's a boat due in the harbour tonight. It's all black market of course, and they only deal in cash."

"There was me thinking I could take you out to dinner."

She looks wistful. "Weren't those the days, eh? 2020, the last time I went out for dinner. Anyway, how was your pilgrimage?"

"Unexpected. So many things I didn't understand before, and I still don't. But between that and my dreams, I seem to have settled my course."

"To where?"

"Well, back here of course."

"You told me you never revisited old ground."

"But then like all muddle-headed humanoids I'm mostly dead-wood and nonsense aren't I?"

You toss her the pebble and she snatches it up.

"Is this what I think it is? The devil of all details? What do want me to do with it?"

"Whatever you like. I don't need it any more. I know what's real without that thing reminding me all the time."

She tosses it into the sea, which you admit you didn't expect, and you wonder what that means, if you were wrong, if you've left it too late, and things are already sour between you, that it's some kind of rejection, an impatience for your considerable shortcomings. But then she's grinning at you, teasing, the years falling away from her. She's palmed the pebble, only feigned tossing it, and now holds it between thumb and forefinger for you to see, then slips it snug into her pocket. Always the challenger. The sum of all her room numbers still equals eight. But remember, at your very best you can be like her, Chris, just like, at her very worst, she can still be like you.

"I'll meditate on it later," she says. "See what myth and metaphor I can wring out of it."

The tide inches in and makes a grab for the poem. The bottle tilts, falls back into the waves, then bobs a little way out to where the currents take it, dissolve it back into the meaninglessness of time, then cast it forward, far, far into the future, to when some unsuspecting soul picks it up. She watches it go, one of the finest

minds in Europe, biting her nails here in anonymity on England's North Sea coast, still trying to psychoanalyse the neuroses of the world.

"This too will pass," you tell her.

"Yea right," she says. "Or at least by the time it passes, we'll all be dead. We were made for different times, Chris. We're like silk underwear and lace, you and I. It makes sense in your twenties, you know? But later on you're happy to settle for the cosiness of plain flannel."

"Don't give up. One day it'll be safe to go about wearing silk again."

"Maybe." She thinks a while, casts me an anxious glance. "I really did kill him you know?"

"Kadinsky? No you didn't. You just walked out on him. Sure, you might have wished it, but I was your assassin. It was easy. I didn't need a knife or a gun. I just set him an impossible problem and his ego did the rest. And I did it for one reason and that was to get to you."

"Well, what about your girl from '87?"

"Ah... Jen. God bless her. She means so much. Another time, maybe. But for now, come say hello to my horse."

You link up, you walk. It feels right. It can take your whole life to find the right path, perhaps more than one life, and impossible to navigate, but when you're finally on that path, you know it.

"The cities are on fire," she says, matter of fact, unemotional, as if discussing the weather. "The gangs have come out of the sewers armed to the teeth, and there are running battles with the police and the army. Then there's the CLA trying to tear it all down. The Internet's still working but the nodes are under constant attack. It could all collapse any day. I was worried about you, Chris. Thought you wouldn't be coming back."

You tell her how the border posts were hit a couple of nights ago, and how the GPS system's been encrypted, thus offering her your own matter of fact snippets of doom. But you've spent a life glued to current affairs, and you've a feeling nothing's really going to register any more unless it's a bullet between the eyes.

"So... you say there's a boat gets in tonight?"

"We'll all be going down to help unload."

"I'll be there."

"Besides that everyone's growing stuff. Catching rabbits. Still

plenty of fish in the sea of course. We can feed ourselves, at least we can when we're organised. God knows what it's like in the cities though."

"Whoever would have though it might come to this?"

"Strange times for sure. But on the upside, the weather is kind, and the sea is ever so beautiful today."

The horse ambles along behind you, a calming presence. Looks like you'll be living life a little longer yet, and still nothing making any sense to you beyond the odd glimpse now and then, and the big revelations always just a little beyond your reach, beyond words, as if only to encourage you in the right direction. In other words, everything's the way it has to be, that only to the dreamer of your dreams does the chaos make perfect sense, while for you, and Sophia, and all the others like you on the road to nowhere, the only thing you need be certain of in life is that you exist.

That you exist, Chris.

Forty Three

You wake with the sun, lie there a while in the comfort of oblivion while the memory of your life thus far - the where and the when of it - catches up with you, restores identity and place. You have a hazy recollection of a clean, white room, of bay windows that look out upon the sea, and curtains floating in a briny breeze,... a fleeting impression of making love with a woman who laughed and loved well and had about her the scent of sandalwood.

Except, that's not it, is it? that was something else. You forget what, but it carries with it into this new day a feeling-tone of post-coital bliss, a feeling that lingers as your reality catches up with you. And then,...

Ah,... okay.

The bothy windows are steamed up and the light filtering through them is dazzling. Jen's bunk is empty, her stuff has gone, and there's a smiley face finger-painted in the glass by way of parting. Then that dream-sense of post-coital bliss evaporates, leaving only the gut-acid of regret. You didn't do it, did you? But more important than that, you blew the chance of a relationship, swerving her invitation to join her on the road,... all the way to India and to at least the foreseeable future of both your lives.

A woman like that, Chris!

How might knowing her have changed your life?

How might not knowing her change it now?

How might knowing her and not knowing her at the same time add dimensions and layering to your life beyond imagining, beyond the dreaming?

What?

You think back on everything you said last night, swing your legs over the side of bunk and wait a moment while your head clears. Why didn't you say you'd go with her? Why didn't you just make love like you wanted to, like *she* wanted to?

And why does it feel like you've been this way before?

You step outside, blinking in the sunlight. The morning is cool, the sea is calm, the mountain clear, monstrous but beautiful. She's squatting by the Primus stove, boiling water, and whittling a stick with that ridiculously ferocious knife of hers. It's like she's waiting for something... for you maybe.

"Wondered when you'd surface," she says, and there's just the hint of a sulk in her voice. "Fancy a brew?"

Then your heart's cracking against your ribs, for sure you thought she'd gone, that you'd woken into this new day like you'd already spent your whole life regretting it.

"Em... thanks, yes. Thought you'd gone, actually."

"I did... go. But then I got to wondering... so I turned around and came back."

"Wondering?"

"Something you said last night, about not looking closely enough at life. I did the Dales in a month, trampled all over them in a great hurry like I'd got the hounds of hell at my back. But that's not really getting to know a place, is it? That's just running, looking over your shoulder afraid of all your doubts catching up with you. Never lingering for a moment on anything for fear your brain will eat itself."

"Ah, that. Yes..."

"Look under every stone, you said, behind every tree. Slow it down. Look properly, see with, not through the eye."

"Sure. But you want danger, Jen. In the Dales you're never more than a mile or two from a teashop, or a quaint old inn where there's good beer and food, and a pretty little room with clean sheets for the night. That's what you said."

"I know. Sounds very pleasant, now, actually."

"So, what really changed your mind?"

"I told you... what you said last night."

"And?"

"Okay... had a dream. Last night... or at least I think it was last night, or maybe it was something I've dreamed before, or the dream was just telling me I've dreamed it before... you know how dreams are?"

"I kno...."

"Can't remember much of it now. But this morning, I'm fancying that quaint old inn, lost in a fold of hills, a place at the very edge of light, you know? You come down to it after a long day on the fells, and you're looking forward to a shower and clean sheets, and a nice breakfast in the morning. And every day you set out and walk, and come back every evening to a good dinner and glass of wine."

You smile at that. The way she describes it, you've a feeling you should know it, that inn, that you might have been there yourself once, but you can't remember, or maybe, like her, it was just something you dreamed of.

"Sounds good to me." And then, after a breath: "I don't suppose..."

"Suppose?..."

"I could tag along for a bit. Would you mind? I could give you a lift. We could be in the Dales tomorrow."

She tries not to smile at that, but it's obvious the idea pleases her and, that it pleases her, lights you up and you realise it was meant to be, both the future knowing, and the not knowing of her.

"Okay," she says.

The water's boiling. Right now you've just the one tea-bag between you. You've no work, no money, and the world's upside down, on the brink of recession. Again. But such material poverty has never seemed suddenly so rich, so full of potential for discovery.

You never did finish photographing those bothies, did you? It doesn't matter; by sundown tomorrow, you'll be in the Dales, and you'll be with Jen, looking for the Inn at the Edge of Light.

So take a breath, Chris.

And make a wish.